

## ***Our Deepest Failures***

*Luke 22:31-34, 54-62*

Since we are going to be learning from **Peter's** deepest failure this morning, I'd like you to bring to mind **your** deepest failure. How have you failed God or others or yourself in some way (you've done something that you know you shouldn't have)? This could be something in your past or something in your present. You might have sinned in thought or word or deed. You might have failed in ways that very few people know about or in ways that lots of people know about. It might be a one-time action/decision or an ongoing sin.

When we experience failure, we are often tempted to go in one of two opposite directions. Sometimes we screw up our willpower and resolve never to fail again: "God, I've learned my lesson. From this point forward I am going to live the way I should. I am going to prove to you that I'm worthy of your love."

And sometimes we go the opposite direction. We tell ourselves, "Self, you are such a loser and a fraud that you will never get things right. Why don't you just give up and quit pretending that you ever can walk with God. . ."

Can you relate to either or both of those two extremes?

Today's passage gives us another option after we've failed God or others or ourselves in some deep way. This option is not halfway in between proving to God we're worth and giving up; it's a completely different path altogether. Instead of a self-focused response (what we can or can't do), this is a God-focused response (what God can do) to our failures. Peter's experience in Luke 22 tells us that:

***Our deepest failures reveal the extravagance of God's grace.*** The implication is that when we experience failure, instead of becoming fixated on ourselves, we should become enamored with God and the grace he offers. We're going to first look at Peter's deepest failure, and then we'll consider the implications for our deepest failures.

***Peter's Deepest Failure and God's Extravagant Grace*** (*Luke 22:31-34, 54-62*) To me, Luke 22:31-34 are some of the most intriguing verses in the entire Bible. Luke lets us listen in on Jesus' conversation with Peter the night before his crucifixion. Jesus begins by telling Peter/Simon something he had no way of knowing.

31 "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat,

Numerous times in Scripture God pulls back the curtains and gives us a glimpse into the unseen realm. That happened in Job 1 when Satan made a wager with God: "Take down the hedge of protection around Job. Let me have my way with him and he will curse you to your face." Satan lost that wager. Here, Jesus tells us that Satan demanded to have his way with Peter that he might "sift [him] like wheat." The image there is that of wheat being separated from the chaff. Similar to the situation with Job,

Satan wanted to prove that Peter was all chaff, that he was a complete fraud. Doing so he would also have proved that Jesus didn't really have any true disciples; he just had a few admirers who would quickly fall away.

The subsequent account makes clear that Satan was granted permission to sift Peter like wheat. What Jesus says next reflects his heart toward Peter (and toward you and me).

32 but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

Jesus wanted Peter to know that he had prayed for him. Specifically, he had prayed that after Satan sifted him like wheat his faith would not fail. That is Satan's end game; he wants people to abandon their faith in Jesus. Jesus wanted Peter to know that he had talked with his heavenly Father about this issue.

He confirms that Peter's faith wouldn't fail when he says, “And **when** you have turned again (not **if** you turn again), strengthen your brothers.” In this context, to “turn” means to repent, to turn **away from** your sin/foolishness and to turn **back** to God. “When you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” Jesus is telling Peter that he would once again be useful for the Kingdom.

Look at Peter's response:

33 Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.”

You've got to love Peter's transparent here. He really believed that he was ready to be arrested with Jesus and to die with Jesus. [Matthew and Mark both record that the rest of the disciples said the same thing (Matthew 26:35, Mark 14:31).] Peter was no coward. We read later in Luke 22 that when Jesus was arrested one of his disciples cut off the right ear of the high priest's servant; John's account (John 18:10) tells us that Peter was that disciple. Peter was the type of person who would risk his life for Jesus.

But Peter did not know his own heart. But Jesus did:

34 Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”

Jesus wanted Peter to know that in just a few hours he would have denied three times that he even knew Jesus. It's not always the case, but quite often in Scripture the number three indicates completeness or wholeness. In Isaiah 6 when the angels cry out, “holy, holy, holy,” they are saying that God is completely holy. By denying Jesus three times, Peter is **completely** disavowing any loyalty to Jesus.

This is the sifting that Satan had demanded; Satan would tempt Peter to deny Jesus completely. And that's exactly what happened. After Jesus was arrested, Luke gives a detailed and nuanced description of Peter's denial beginning in verse 54. The most

likely source for these details and nuance was Peter himself. The Bible doesn't ignore or sanitize the failures of Jesus' followers; they serve to highlight the ***extravagance of God's grace***.

54 Then they seized him [Jesus] and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. 55 And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. 56 Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him." 57 But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him."

Instead of confessing, "Yes, Jesus is my Lord," Peter denied even knowing him. Denial number one.

58 And a little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not."

Instead of confessing that he was Jesus' disciple, he denied him a second time. The fact that the next denial came about an hour later means that Peter had time to think about what he was doing.

59 And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean."

This man knew that Peter was from Galilee because of his accent (Matthew 26:73). This gave Peter had a third opportunity to confess Jesus; but he denied him instead.

60 But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed.

He hadn't even gotten the words out of his mouth when the rooster crowed. Apparently the courtyard where Peter was sitting was adjacent to the place where Jesus was being held.

61 And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times."

When Peter made eye-contact with Jesus he remembered that Jesus had predicted that he would deny him completely. We aren't told, but I don't think that the expression on Jesus' face was that "I told you so" look that we sometimes give people; I don't think it was exasperation or contempt. I think it was probably deep sadness because Peter was one of his closest friends. I think Peter grieved the heart of Jesus. And Peter knew it.

62 And he went out and wept bitterly.

In contrast with Judas who went out and hanged himself after betraying Jesus (Matthew 27:5), Peter went out and wept bitterly after denying Jesus. Remember that Jesus told Peter, "After you turn, strengthen your brothers." He had started to "turn." This was godly sorrow leading to true repentance.

The book of Acts tells us that everything Jesus had prayed for Peter came to pass. His faith did not fail. Once he turned back to God in repentance, he strengthened his brothers and sisters with his words and actions. His faithful discipleship dominates the early chapters of Acts.

And somewhat ironically, the book of Acts and subsequent history tells us that Peter's boastings about going to prison and death with Jesus also came to pass: after being given the gift of the Holy Spirit, he **was willing** to follow Jesus to prison and to death. It's hard to verify, but Foxes' Book of Martyrs tells us that when Peter was sentenced to death in Rome, he requested that he be crucified upside down because he didn't consider himself worthy to be executed in the exact same manner as his Lord.

Peter had a hard life, but his life was full of the grace of God. He finished his race and was rewarded with eternal life. For eternity he will experience God's extravagant grace.

### ***Our Deepest Failures and God's Extravagant Grace***

Here's my question in light of today's passage: Do you think Peter's experience was the exception or the norm? In other words, do you think that Satan wants to take you down (destroy your faith), but that Jesus knows your heart better than you do and that he has prayed for you that your faith may not fail. . . and that after you turn back to God, you (like Peter) will be useful to God to do significant things in this world?

When you read through the Bible, you find many examples of people who repent after their deepest failures and find the grace of God to be extravagant:

- \* Remember the guy who made a golden calf in the wilderness that the children of Israel worshiped (while Moses was on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments)? He became the very first High Priest who led the people in worship.
- \* David sinned in spectacular ways (adultery and murder) and yet is forever known as "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14).

Peter's experience wasn't the rare exception. It is the norm. The details of Peter's experience are unique; but the same factors at play in Peter's failure and restoration are at play in the life of every believer. Let's consider several Scriptures that make this clear.

**Satan's schemes.** (1 Peter 5:8-9) Just like Peter, you and I have an unseen spiritual enemy who is intelligent and cunning and who wants to take us down. He doesn't merely want to annoy us; he wants to destroy us. Not surprisingly, years after Satan sifted him like wheat, Peter wrote this in 1 Peter 5:8-9.

8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

The command is to be sober-minded (instead of careless) and watchful and to resist him through all the means God has given us: prayer, Scripture, faith, the gospel, etc. (see Ephesians 6:10-20).

Let's consider a few elements of God's extravagant grace. . .

**God's comprehensive knowledge of our hearts.** (Psalm 139) Just as Jesus knew Peter's heart (both the good and the bad), God knows our hearts comprehensively. In Psalm 139 David writes this:

1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me!  
2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from afar.  
3 You search out my path and my lying down  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
4 Even before a word is on my tongue,  
behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.

David wasn't just saying, "God knows everything." That's true, but David was saying, "God knows everything about *me*." He knows every one of my thoughts. He knows what I'm going to say before I say it (like Jesus knew what Peter would say when questioned about being his disciple). God wants us to know that he knows our hearts better than we do. He knew about our deepest failures before they happened. And just like Jesus called Peter to be his disciple with full knowledge that he would deny him, he calls us to himself knowing that we will fail him. Romans 5 even tells us that while we were his enemies Christ died for us. That's pure grace.

**Jesus' intercession/prayer for us.** (Hebrews 7:25, Romans 8:34) Just as he prayed for Peter, Jesus prays for us. In Hebrews 7, the author argues that Jesus is a superior high priest to those who served in the temple because he holds his priesthood permanently. In verse 25 we read:

25 Consequently, he [Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

If you have drawn near to God through faith in Jesus, you should live your life with the knowledge that he is able to save you completely because he "always lives to make intercession" for you. His prayers for Peter were effective (his faith did not fail), and his prayers for you are effective. We're not told *exactly* what he prays, but sure he prays for our perseverance as he did for Peter's. Knowing that Jesus intercedes for us should never make us complacent or passive ("I guess I'm good to go since Jesus prays for me. . ."); rather it should fill us with courage and faith that our seeking after God will bear fruit.

**Repentance.** (1 John 1:5-10) The ability to repent - to turn back to God when we've sinned - is pure grace. God didn't have to offer us repentance; he could have said, "One strike and you're out!" But he didn't. Just as Peter could turn back to Jesus after denying him, we too can turn back in repentance when we've sinned. 1 John 1 tells us that if we've been "walking in the darkness" (not practicing the truth), we can walk in the light and have fellowship with one another and "the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). In 1 John 1:9 we read:

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we come clean and admit to God that we've sinned, God proves that he is faithful and just: he gives us a fresh experience of forgiveness and cleansing. Like he did with Peter, he restores us to full fellowship with himself. And like Peter, we are now equipped to be used God in ways that we never thought possible. Our restoration doesn't only benefit us; it benefits all the people who see God's extravagant grace on full display in our lives.

***Our deepest failures reveal the extravagance of God's grace.*** Let's consider how this truth intersects our lives this morning.

Some of you, no doubt, are followers of Jesus, but you're in the middle of your deepest failure. You are like Peter sitting around the fire in that courtyard; in some way you are denying Jesus. There is some aspect of Jesus' teaching that you're abandoning. Satan is whispering lies into your ears and he is sifting you like wheat. You haven't yet decided what you are going to do. . . Learn from Peter! Make eye-contact with Jesus and see his compassion. Know that he has prayed for you; you're not surprising him by what you've done. I've got a friend who's convinced me over the past year or so that God is never disappointed in us. He's grieved by our sin, but not disappointed. If you're disappointed in someone it's because you thought they were one thing but it turns out they are another; that never happens with God because he never misunderstands who we are. He knows us perfectly and love us anyway.

Go out and weep bitterly if you need to. Admit to him your sin and turn back to him. His grace is great than your sin. It really is. God will redeem your failures and use you in ways you never imagined he could.

For others of you, your deepest failures are largely in your past. You're not perfect, but you are experiencing God's grace in extravagant ways. If that's you, pour out your thanksgiving to him this morning.

Perhaps others of you have never thought in the categories we've been discussing this morning. Maybe you've gone to church your whole life, but you've only thought about what you can/can't do. Maybe you've thought that if you just try your best to live a good life that God will forget about your sins/failures. Or maybe you've done something that you think is so bad that you don't really have a chance with God; you've resigned

yourself to live a life full of guilt and shame and then after you die you'll just see what happens.

Peter's experience is very relevant for you. Like Peter and like everybody else, you have sinned and there isn't a thing you can do to remove your sin. But Jesus has. After Peter denied him, he was interrogated, flogged beyond recognition, and crucified. He bore our sin on the cross. If you confess that you have sinned and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, your sin will be wiped away by grace and you will be saved. That salvation is the most extravagant gift you have ever been offered. Will you receive it today?