

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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Finding Your Way Back to Jesus Series

WHEN FAITH FAILS

Mark 14:66-72 and John 21:15-17

November 5, 2023

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Last week, I preached a sermon entitled “When Jesus Sleeps.” I talked about the difficulty of struggling through a storm and feeling as if Jesus is sleeping. I reminded you that it’s better to be in the boat with a sleeping Jesus than in the storm without him. I encouraged you to resist the temptation to jump ship. Today, I want to talk to those who already have.

Today’s sermon is titled “When Faith Fails.” I will address two primary points in the life of a man named Peter:

- The process of falling away.
- The plea to come back home.

1-THE PROCESS OF FALLING AWAY, AS INITIATED BY PETER

SCRIPTURE: Mark 14:66-72

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. “You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,” she said. ⁶⁸ But he denied it. “I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about,” he said, and went out into the entryway. ⁶⁹ When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, “This fellow is one of them.” ⁷⁰ Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, “Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.” ⁷¹ He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.” ⁷² Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

EXPLANATION: It had been a long, hard night. First, Peter and the other disciples celebrated the Passover meal with Jesus. It was a different type of celebration. Their master had washed their feet and made strange predictions. Then, when they should have been tucking themselves into bed, Jesus had taken them to the Garden of Gethsemane and asked them to pray. Unfortunately, they fell asleep. Finally, soldiers came to arrest Jesus. Peter drew his sword and cut off a man's ear. Jesus told Peter to put the sword away, and he healed the man's ear. Then he allowed the soldiers to take him away.

The rest of the disciples scattered. Only Peter and one other lagged behind the regiment to see what happened to their dearest friend. That night, Peter's faith was put to the test. Unfortunately, Peter failed.

I want you to imagine with me what Peter must have felt in those moments. I want you to think about the reasons why he denied his Lord.

Prior to this dreadful evening, Peter had been one of Jesus's closest friends. Peter was one of the inner circle. Peter was often rash, but he acted out of his passionate love and belief in Christ. It was Peter who had faith enough to step out onto the water with Jesus. Peter was the one who drew the sword in defense of his Savior. How then did Peter come to deny Jesus in such a short period of time? Why did his faith take such a hasty nosedive, especially when Jesus had warned him about this very thing?

There are several reasons that likely led to Peter's denial of knowing Jesus:

- His physical condition.
- His emotional state.
- His intellectual confusion.

HIS PHYSICAL CONDITION

EXPLANATION: Peter was exhausted. In the Garden, Jesus asked the disciples, and specifically Peter, to be in prayer. Three times Jesus found them sleeping. The Bible says *their eyes were heavy*. They were so tired, they could not keep their eyes open. Each time they fell into a slumber, Jesus woke them up. Once Jesus was arrested, Peter woke up quickly, but his body was still suffering from exhaustion.

Sleep deprivation impacts our decision-making skills. Sometimes, as a result of very real fatigue, we say and do things we would not have said or done under other circumstances. This is not an excuse, but it is a warning to be aware. Two years ago when I was tired, a friend of mine reminded me not to make a decision when I was down a rabbit hole.

HIS EMOTIONAL STATE

EXPLANATION:

- Peter was frightened for Jesus, and he was frightened for himself. The danger was very real and very present.
- Even before the denials, he was probably also feeling guilty. Like all of us who have experienced a traumatic event, he was probably rethinking the events of the evening and wondering what he could have done differently. If only he had been more alert, maybe he would have seen the soldiers coming and they could have escaped?
- He was also grieving. He was sure that the days of ministering with Jesus were behind him. What did this mean for their future? For his future?
- And I'm sure he was angry. Why did Jesus prevent him from fighting? Why did Jesus allow himself to be taken? Why had Jesus not wiped all his oppressors from the face of the earth and taken his rightful place on the throne?

Most of us would readily agree that raw emotions can lead to bad decisions. Again, it's not an excuse, but it does explain the process by which Peter fell away so quickly.

HIS INTELLECTUAL CONFUSION

EXPLANATION: Nothing made sense. Peter was not a Biblical scholar. He was not a theologian. He was a fisherman who had spent the last three years sitting at the feet of Jesus trying to learn what it meant to be a disciple. Following Jesus around was no doubt empowering! Seeing people healed, witnessing evil spirits come out of people, seeing miracles, watching Jesus boldly telling off the religious establishment.

Peter went from being a fisherman to a position of prominence. He went from being a nobody to being a somebody. Life was great and every day with Jesus was getting better. Peter probably thought what he was doing was exactly the way it was going to be for the rest of his life. The circumstances of that evening did not match the picture in his head. This reality, the reality of Jesus dying on a cross, did not line up with the way Peter had imagined things would be.

Here is what I personally believe. I believe that Peter felt let down by Jesus. Even though Jesus foretold many things, Peter did not understand them. He had an image of Jesus that was shattered. This strong, strong man, with such a soft side about him, this man who had it all together and gave him a whole new life - for three years they laughed together, they camped together, they ate together. Jesus was his best friend, provider, and protector. And now...where was Jesus? Why did Jesus say nothing to his accusers?

Peter, now alone, did not have his best friend, provider, and protector. His teacher, his inspiration for living was gone.

When the circumstances around us do not make sense, we tend to revert to what feels right and run from what feels wrong. While Peter struggled with the conditions of his own heart, the world did not stop spinning, and trouble soon came knocking at his door. Before he knew it, Peter had taken a step away from Jesus. After a while, he had distanced himself even further. Before morning came, Peter had disowned his Savior and abandoned his faith.

APPLICATION: Sometimes people turn away from God out of direct disobedience, but sometimes in more complicated circumstances like Peter experienced, disillusionment is the result. Peter was no longer in the boat with Jesus or even on the water grabbing his hand. You know the story of Peter walking on the water and when he took his eyes off of Jesus, he began to sink and Jesus rescued him. Jesus was nowhere to be found now. Peter was in the storm all alone. You may be there now.

The physical, emotional, and mental challenges of this world may have worn you down. You are tired. You are sad. You are angry. Things simply don't make sense. It seemed that Jesus did not come to the rescue when you needed him. Jesus did not do what you wanted him to do. His response did not look like you imagined it would be. And, finally, you just gave up.

- Maybe you were like Peter and voiced those frustrations in the form of an audible denial.
- Maybe you have publicly turned away from Jesus in your disappointment.
- It's more likely, especially if you are here today, that your decision to pull away has been more private. Outside, you look the part of a Christian, but on the inside, you too have abandoned your faith.

While thinking through this sermon series, I was reminded of the parable of the seeds in Mark, Chapter 4. Seeds fell upon different types of ground. The seeds that fell upon rocky soil sprang up quickly but when the sun came out, they withered.

I believe that many people who fall away are like those seeds. The soil around them is not good. The conditions are good for quick germination, sprouting, and growth, but the conditions are not good for long-term sustainability.

I want to explore this for a bit:

ILLUSTRATION: Let's say a woman is invited by a group of women to attend a Christian retreat. The woman is dealing with all kinds of struggles. But on the retreat, she is around women who seem happy. They seem to enjoy life. At the retreat, there is a singer who sings Christian music that is very moving. There is a speaker who talks about Jesus. The woman's attention is piqued. She feels accepted into a whole new world she never knew existed. Deep inside, she wants this life she is learning about. And she goes to bed that night and has a full night's sleep.

The next day at the retreat, a few women spend time with her. She opens up and tells them some about herself and the women seem to love her. At the end of the retreat, the speaker tells people how to come to faith in Jesus, and our friend asks Jesus to forgive her of her sins and become her Savior. She is convinced of the resurrection and has a desire to become a follower of Jesus.

When she returns home, she continues listening to the music she was introduced to. It means so much to her. Overnight, her life seems to be better. She goes to work with a new perspective. She's happier than she's ever been. She gets a raise at work and is praised for her work. Her problems seem to go away. She has a whole new life. Let's say this goes on for months, perhaps a couple of years.

But the soil in her life is rocky. Because of so many challenges in her life, she naturally defaults to skepticism. The retreat seems far in the past. None of those

ladies at the retreat came around her to nurture her. Her husband does not support her new way of living. He drinks too much and becomes abusive, and her son continues to get in trouble with the law. And when she is most desperate for friendship, two of her lifelong friends show up. One says she tried religion and it didn't work. The other said she never trusted Christians.

Had this woman been discipled and had she been taught how to learn about the Jesus in the Bible, she might have been in a different place. To her, something was wrong, but she did not know what. She felt that Jesus had let her down, because if there was a Jesus, why was he not helping her? Why did he not remove her husband's addiction? If there was a Jesus, why was her son in so much trouble?

Listen to me, Christians: It is very important to nurture relationships with new believers. It is very important for them to learn about the Jesus of the Bible and not the counterfeit prosperity Jesus, and the counterfeit Jesus-takes-away-all-your-problems Jesus. Most of you have been gardeners at some point in your lives, you know what to do with rocky soil... and that is to remove the rocks.

I believe that many who fall away are people who haven't grown as Christians and when the sun came up, they withered due to lack of roots. They accepted some teachings about Jesus and the Christian life but did not go deeper.

Listen to how Jesus describes the rocky ground:

SCRIPTURE: Mark 4:16-17

Others are like the seed planted on rocky ground. They hear the teaching and quickly accept it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they don't allow the teaching to go deep into their lives, they keep it only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the teaching they accepted, they quickly give up.

NOTE: I realize I am speaking to a diverse audience. Some of you have been faithful to the Lord for many years and may feel like today's message is not relevant to you. I realize others may have fallen away, and for different reasons. You have a story that is yours and yours alone. Let me explain two things: I am not here to judge, nor is anyone else. And there is hope.

Yes, there is a process of falling away, but there is also:

2-THE PLEA TO COME BACK HOME, AS INITIATED BY JESUS

John, chapter 21 tells us how Peter found his way back to Jesus.

A few days after the crucifixion. It appears the disciples who had been fishermen when Jesus called them returned to their previous jobs. Jesus called out to them, but they did not recognize him:

“Do you have any fish?”

They said, “No,” and he told them to put their nets on the right side of the boat. They were unable to haul in the net because it was so full. When Peter realized it was Jesus, he jumped out of the boat and into the water since they were not far from the shore.

Jesus made breakfast for them. It was the third time he had appeared since his resurrection.

SCRIPTURE: John 21:15-17

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

EXPLANATION: Peter’s worst fears became reality. Jesus was crucified, but as we know, Jesus also rose again. He appeared to the disciples, including Peter, but the Bible does not record any previous conversation about Peter’s failures during his first two appearances. Even here, in this scene, Jesus does not directly call out what Peter had done. Peter knew, and Peter knew that Jesus knew.

All the gospels share Peter’s failures, but only John records his restoration. In these verses, we see a similarity between the events of that fateful night. Like the Passover meal they shared before the crucifixion, Jesus served his friends and broke bread with them. In the same way that Peter had three opportunities to confirm or deny his relationship with Christ before the crucifixion, Jesus offered Peter three opportunities to confirm his love for him. Notice what had not changed.

- Peter was still physically tired. He and the other fishermen had been up all night.

- He was as emotional as ever. Upon hearing that Jesus was on shore, he rashly put on his clothes and jumped into the water to take a swim.
- He was just as confused about the uncertainty of the future. Instead of telling people about the risen Christ, he had decided to return to his previous occupation of fishing.

But this time, Peter's response was different. Three times, Jesus asked Peter, and three times Peter affirmed. "Yes, Jesus, I love you." Make no mistake, Peter could have walked away. And make no mistake, Jesus could have left Peter alone with his guilt and his betrayal. Jesus could have gone back to heaven, and Peter probably would have gone back to being a full-time fisherman.

But here's the thing. Peter disowned Christ, but Christ never disowned Peter. Jesus loved Peter, and he did not want his faith to die. This conversation on the beach that day was a reminder of their love for one another and a call for Peter to come home, to come back into the fold, not only in appearances but in heart, in soul, and in mind. Jesus knew that Peter's faith had failed, but he wanted Peter to continue to follow him.

ILLUSTRATION: There was another disciple whose faith failed. His name was Judas.

- Jesus called Judas, just as he did the other disciples.
- He taught Judas in the same way he taught the others.
- He loved Judas just as much as he loved Peter.
- He washed Judas's feet along with the other disciples.
- Just like Jesus warned Peter of what was to come, Jesus tried to warn Judas.
- Even when Judas betrayed him with a kiss, Jesus called him friend.

Judas also mourned his decision, but Judas never returned home.

APPLICATION: Matthew 11:28 says, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*"

- Maybe you have turned your back on Jesus.
- Maybe you are tired of all the pain that life has brought you.
- Maybe you are afraid or hurt or angry.

- Maybe you are just confused. Following Jesus has not turned out to be what you thought it would be.

If you have hardened your heart towards Jesus, I want to remind you: Your soul is valuable to Jesus. Jesus loves you so much that he died for you, and he does not want you to navigate the storms of this life on your own. He is still there, standing on the shores of your heart. He sees you. He is calling to you. He is inviting you to come back to him, but the choice is yours. You can be like Judas and try to figure it out on your own. You can be like Peter and answer Jesus's call to follow him. The altar is open if you want to come and pray.

I stated that the call home is initiated by Jesus. Yes, it is. The very fact that you are hearing this message, I believe, is the Lord reaching out to you.

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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