

INTRODUCTION

This is a message about how to overcome failure. If you've never failed, then you are free to leave now so you can beat the Methodists to the restaurants. But if you've ever failed, God has a word for you today.

Let me tell you the true story of Walter. He grew up in a very dysfunctional family with a dominant, domineering father. He and his three brothers all ran away before the age of 16. Walter lied about his age so he could join the army. After the army, Walter started a business at age 22 in Kansas City, but it failed and he had to declare bankruptcy. With only \$40 to his name he moved to California to try to become an actor. But he never made it. He and his brother Roy started an animation service, but never gained rights to their drawings, so they lost ownership of their art.

Walter suffered what he described as a "heck of a breakdown" but he refused to give up. He had the idea to draw a cartoon mouse he would name Mortimer Mouse. Walter's wife, Lillian, suggested a better name would be Mickey Mouse. So Mickey Mouse was born in 1928, but Walt Disney still faced more failure. After producing several movies and cartoons, his company was \$4 million in debt after WWII and business was slow. He had a dream to build a theme park in California called Disneyland, but he had no money. Walt was depressed and having a hard time dealing with stress. He took a chance on a new medium called television, The Mickey Mouse Club, Davy Crockett, and the Wonderful World of Color. Finally things turned around and Disneyland opened in 1955. Walt had a dream of Disney World in a swampy area near a little town called Orlando. Walt died in 1966 at age 65 before Disney World opened. Today the Walt Disney Company is worth \$75 billion.

Walt Disney experienced several episodes of failure, but he never gave up. In this message we're going to look at huge failure in the life of Simon Peter. We're going to see that he didn't allow his failure to become final or fatal.

In Mark 14:27-31, Jesus and His disciples are at the Last Supper and Jesus said, "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

Then they left the upper room and walked to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed while Peter slept. When Jesus was arrested, Peter followed the group back to the house of Caiaphas.

Mark 14:66-72. "While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him.

"You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." 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." He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." 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.

Have you ever denied the Lord? I know I have. I have failed to confess Jesus many times. Probably my worst denial was when I was a sophomore in high school and a friend asked me why my family and I went to church. Although I knew the Lord, I wasn't living for Him at that time, so I was embarrassed. And I said, "Oh, I just go to church because my parents make me." I didn't realize at the time that my friend was asking about God. Sadly, he died that year in a car wreck, and I don't know that he ever trusted Jesus. I can relate to Simon Peter. Can you?

So how does a follower of Jesus get to the place where they deny the Lord? But more importantly, how does a follower of Jesus recover after spiritual failure? That's what we're going to talk about in this message.

I. THE PATHWAY TO PERSONAL FAILURE

Simon Peter was a leader among the twelve disciples. He was one of the first disciples Jesus called, and after Jesus ascended back into heaven, he was one of the leaders of the early church. However, I want you to imagine that night when Peter was sitting around the fire at the house of Caiaphas. He was brave enough to follow the mob that arrested Jesus, but he was too afraid to identify himself as a companion of Jesus. While the illegal Jewish trial of Jesus was being conducted Peter was asked three times if he knew Jesus. And three times, he denied Jesus. When we look at Peter's life, we can see there were at least three steps on the downward path of failure. Simon says there are three steps that lead to failure. We need to know these steps, because they are the same steps to denial followers of Jesus take today.

A. His first downward step was disagreement with God's Word

When Jesus took the disciples on a retreat to Caesarea Philippi, He asked them what people were saying. They said, "Some say you are John the Baptist, Jeremiah, Elijah, or one of the prophets." Then Jesus said, "But who do YOU say that I am?" There was probably silence for a moment or two when Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus complimented Peter on his good understanding. Then Jesus began to tell them He would be going to Jerusalem where He would be put to death. That was God's perfect revelation.

But Peter disagreed with God's word. The Bible says, "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!' Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.'" (Matthew 16:22-23)

Peter heard God's plan straight from the mouth of Jesus, but he thought he knew better. He said, "None of this business about dying!"

In the same way, you are headed for failure when you start disagreeing with this book. When a person no longer consults this book for personal morality, then that person is heading for a fall. So I challenge you personally to read and obey God's Word.

There was a time when our national morality was based upon the morality of the Bible, but we have long since forsaken God's Word as a source of right and wrong—and that's one reason we are in the mess we're in.

B. Peter's second step toward failure was overconfidence

When Jesus predicted that all the disciples would leave him, Peter bragged that he would stick with Jesus. He said, "All these other turkeys may fly away, but I'll stand by you whatever happens!"

But Jesus said, "Peter, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." Peter said, "Never! Not me, Lord!"

The Bible has a strong warning against overconfidence. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." (Proverbs 16:18) I'm not a Catholic priest, so I don't hear confession. But through the years, I've had hundreds of people come and confess sins to me. Of course, I will carry all these confessions in confidence to the grave. As you can imagine, I've heard plenty of sins over the past forty years. But I've never had a single person come to me and confess the sin of pride. Pride is a condition that blinds the person who has it.

Two Christian men were talking and one said, "You know, pride is one sin I've never had any problem with." The other man said, "That's because you don't have anything to be proud about." The first man got angry and said, "Why, I've got more to be proud about than you do!"

Pride is an attitude that causes you to think you are incapable of sin. But we need to understand that any of us are capable of denying the Lord at any time.

C. The third step on the pathway to failure was peer pressure from the wrong crowd

Peter sat and warmed himself at the fire with those who were hostile toward Jesus and anyone associated with Jesus. It's hard to stand up and confess Jesus when you are with people who don't share your beliefs. We read in Mark 14:54 that Peter followed Jesus at a distance to the courtyard of Caiaphas' house. That's an indication that we find ourselves in trouble when we don't follow the Lord closely. Some of you may have at one time followed the Lord closely, but you have hung back and now you follow the Lord at a distance. And before long you find yourself hanging out with the wrong crowd. Soon you find yourself doing the wrong thing.

Falling away from the Lord doesn't happen overnight. It happens gradually over a period of time. I've always loved the words on the first psalm that talk about the characteristics of a

righteous person. It starts by revealing what a righteous person *doesn't* do. Notice the progression. "Blessed is the one who does not WALK in step with the wicked or STAND in the way that sinners take or SIT in the company of mockers..." (Psalm 1:1) Peter found himself walking with the wrong crowd. Then he stood with them, and then he sat down by the fire with them. If you find yourself walking with the wrong crowd, turn around. Don't stand, and then for sure, don't sit down with them.

Peer pressure is powerful, especially among young people. But adults feel the pressure also. Everyone wants to be accepted by the crowd. Sometimes young people will do almost anything to be a part of the "in crowd." Most children are born with a "mean gene" and if there is something different about one of their own, they can be cruel in making fun of that person. They will pounce on any imperfection. When I was a kid if you had glasses, they called you "four eyes." If you wore braces, you were "metal mouth." If you had big ears they called you "radar." There was one kid with a big nose and they called him "Nanner Nose."

In South Alabama, where I grew up, I was never offered pot; because a pot was something you cooked turnip greens in. But I can remember as an eighth grader sitting in a car with high school boys and being offered a cigarette. I took it and puffed on it and just about choked myself to death—it was awful. But I said it was great because it made me feel cool. That's peer pressure.

Peter took those three steps: disagreement with God's word, overconfidence and he submitted to peer pressure until he denied the Lord.

A little servant girl said, "I've seen you with Jesus; you're one of His disciples!" Peter said, "I am NOT!" A second person said, "Yes you are, you are one of the disciples of Jesus." The second time, Peter said, "You are wrong, I don't know Jesus." Then one of them recognized his accent. Galileans were the rednecks, the hillbillies of the Jews. One man said, "I can tell by the way you talk, you're from Galilee. You are with Jesus."

At that moment Peter lost it. He cursed like the sailor he was. He said, "Blankety-blank! I told you already that I'll be blankety-blank if I even know Jesus, now shut your blankety-blank mouth!" And at that precise moment, it happened. It was still a long time before dawn, but God reached down and plucked the tail feathers of a nearby rooster and it let out a cock-a-doodle do to end all cock-a-doodle do's! Then it crowed again, just to make sure Peter had heard it.

Then Peter remembered the words of the Lord. The very thing Peter said would never happen had happened.

Peter had denied his Lord. He was at rock bottom. Maybe that's where you've been before. Maybe it's where you are now. Or you may find yourself there soon. Never say never. Rock bottom is a bad place to be, but it's a good place to meet the Lord, because there's only one direction you can go from there.

II. THE PATHWAY TO PERSONAL RESTORATION

If you are a human creature, you're going to fail and make mistakes. The thing that reveals the

strength of your character is what you do AFTER you fall. If you stay down, then you wallow in your failure. But if you get up and keep trying to follow God, He can still use you. We looked at the steps that lead to failure. Now let's consider how to move toward restoration. Simon says there are three steps on the pathway to restoration.

A. The first step is to admit your failure

As soon as the rooster crowed, Peter realized he had failed the Lord. The Danish artist, Carl Bloch, captured a scene from the night when Peter denied Jesus. Luke tells us as Jesus was being led out of the courtroom, he looked across the courtyard and stared into the eyes of Peter. If you could see Jesus would see His face was already beaten, his eyes swollen, and blood caked in his beard. That look must have made Peter's blood freeze. But I don't think it was a look of anger or disappointment. I think it was a look of love. It was as if Jesus was saying, "I told you what would happen, now what are you going to do?" In this moment you see the rooster crowing as Peter turns his head away from the gaze of Jesus.

When it comes to failure and sin in your life, you have two options. You can try to hide it, or you can admit it. The Bible says, "Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." (Proverbs 28:13)

Someone said, "To err is human; and to cover it up is too." Once we have made a mistake one of the hardest things to do is to come clean and admit it. Is there an area of your life where you have failed the Lord, and you are in denial? When I was a youth pastor I used to tell students to remember these three phrases do deal with sin. Admit it. Quit it, then Forget it. Admit it: confess it to God. Quit it: stop sinning; then forget it: accept God's cleansing. Admit it. Quit it, Forget it—it still works.

B. The second step is to repent of your sin

The Bible says Peter went out and wept bitterly. The word "repent" means to have a change of heart that leads to a change of behavior. When the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, it is often a painful experience. That's why Peter wept. He was ashamed of his behavior. When was the last time you wept over your sins?

Some of you who are a little older than me can remember when churches used to have what was called a "mourners bench." It was a single pew down at the front. During the invitation, that's where people would go and kneel and weep over their sinful condition.

Sorrow and repentance often go together. The Bible says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." (2 Corinthians 7:10)

Leonard Ravenhill once wrote that revival will never come to our churches without a visit by Mr. Amen and Mr. Wet-eyes. In our culture today, we see people celebrating sin instead of weeping in shame over their sin.

C. The third step is to return to serve with God's people

Do you know the difference between Judas Iscariot and Simon Peter? Judas was sorry for what he did. He had regret, but there was no repentance. He went out and hung himself. After Peter went out and wept, he repented and then he joined the disciples. He was there in the upper room on the first Easter evening when Jesus suddenly appeared in a room where the door was locked. The Bible says all the disciples except Thomas were there.

Jesus not only predicted Peter would deny Him, but He also predicted Peter would get back on track and would be the one to strengthen the other disciples. Jesus said, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32)

Peter failed the Lord when he denied Jesus, but his faith didn't fail. Jesus wasn't finished with Peter. In Mark 16 when the women arrive at the empty tomb an angel tells them, "Go tell the disciples and Peter to meet the Lord in Galilee." (Mark 16:7). It's interesting that the angel singled out Peter.

In John 21 Peter and the disciples were out on the lake in Galilee fishing. They had fished all night and caught nothing. They saw a man standing on the shore who called out, "Caught any fish?" They grumbled, "Nope." The man said, "Throw your net on the other side of the boat." That should have rung a bell. Sure enough they toss the net and it is so full of fish that they have to drag it to shore. John said, "It's the Lord!" Peter, who had denied Jesus a few nights earlier couldn't wait for the boat to get to shore. He dove into the water to swim to Jesus.

It reminds me of that scene in Forrest Gump where he's out on his shrimpin' boat and he sees Lieutenant Dan on the dock. He waves his hand and says, "Lieutenant Dan!" He's so excited that he jumps off the boat and swims to shore. When he arrives he's standing there dripping as his boat crashes into the weeds. He says, "That's my boat."

That's how excited Peter was. When the disciples arrived, Jesus already had a fire going with fish cooking. So once again, Peter is looking at Jesus across a fire. Jesus asks Peter a question three times. Peter do you love me more than these? The old, over-confident Peter would have said, "Of course I do!" But the new and improved Peter wasn't as cocky. Jesus asked Peter do you have *agape* for me (perfect love)? Peter said, "Lord I have *phileo* (fondness) for you. Again Jesus asked the same question, and Peter answers the same: "I have fondness for you." Then it must have stung because the third time Jesus asked, "DO you even have fondness for me?" Then Peter got honest. He said, "Lord you know me better than I know myself. You know I can't claim perfect love, but I do have fondness for you. Jesus smiled and said, "Feed my sheep."

And four weeks later, we see Peter filled with the Holy Spirit standing up and preaching the Gospel on the Day of Pentecost. He was a failure, but it wasn't fatal. He went on to become one of the leaders of the early church.

CONCLUSION

Way back in the last century, the Dallas Cowboys football team used to win Super Bowls. One reason was because they had a great running back named Emmitt Smith. Emmitt set the all-time

NFL rushing record by gaining 18,355 yards. He carried the ball over 4,400 times. That means he was tackled over 4,000 times. He failed over 4,000 times, but after each tackle he got back up and ran to the huddle, ready to run again. In life you're going to be knocked down a few times. The kinds of people God uses are those who get up and keep on serving Him, even if they get knocked down again.

John Maxwell wrote, "Failing doesn't mean I'm a failure; it just means I have not yet succeeded. It doesn't mean I've accomplished nothing; it just means I've learned something. It doesn't mean I'll never make it; it just means I have a reason to start over again. It doesn't mean God has abandoned me; it just means He has a better idea!"

The Bible is full of stories of people who loved God and failed Him on a grand scale, but they returned to God and God used them in a mighty way. Remember, failure isn't fatal!

OUTLINE

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A. Disagreement with God's Word

"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!' Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.'" *Matthew 16:22-23*

B. Overconfidence

"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." *Proverbs 16:18*

C. Peer pressure from the wrong crowd

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For the Joy...
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