

Denied
By Jason Huff
Psalm 32:1-5, Acts 4:1-14, Luke 22:54-62

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Luke 22:54-62. Listen now to God's Word. "Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said. A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." "Man, I am not!" Peter replied. About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly."

One of the hardest things about life is telling the truth under pressure. Do you remember back to early middle school? You'd write down names of the people in your class you thought were cute, you'd put numbers by them, then you'd have to get out your eraser 'cause you got the order wrong? Everybody did it, guys, girls, didn't matter, don't deny it, you know what I'm talking about! But what did matter was if somebody found your list. Then it was denial city. "That's not my handwriting! Somebody else must have written that and put it in my notebook!" It was one thing to get all googly about somebody you liked in your head, but it was something else entirely to confess it out loud. Peer pressure said it wasn't cool. Somehow, that embarrassing memory from middle school sticks in my head whenever I think about Peter's denials of Jesus. We can all relate to that moment when we wanted to stick up for the truth, but we just couldn't.

Now if you've ever studied the four gospel accounts of Jesus' life, you find them similar one moment and different the next. They were written for different audiences by different people who remembered events from their own points of view. Some stories only show up in one gospel, others in more. John's gospel was written later and fills in many of the gaps, only repeating a few important stories that the other three gospels covered. Very few events are found in all four gospels; when they do, we sit up and take notice. This story is one of them.

Now if I were Peter, I would think I was getting a bad rap. My worst failure immortalized in every last gospel account? The only other disciple under that kind of scrutiny in all the gospels is Judas, and that's because he's key to the plot! This passage proves that Jesus was a prophet – He predicted Peter's denials – but so do many other passages in each of the four gospels. Peter's denial doesn't seem like something everybody in the world must know about. Why did every last gospel writer include it? It was expensive in that day to write a scroll or parchment; you didn't waste a dozen lines by accident! And while all the gospels include Peter as one of the disciples after the resurrection, only John tells us how Jesus restored him. What was so significant about his denial of Jesus for us to know?

I believe that it's because Peter's story is critical to understanding three key elements that surround our faith: fear, repentance, and forgiveness. His story shows us how fear can defeat us, how repentance can move us, and how forgiveness can free us. Jesus is our model, the one to whom we declare allegiance and the one we follow. But Peter? *Peter is us*, and his story shows us that failure is never final.

First, Peter's story teaches us that fear is the central reason we remain alienated from God. Sin separates us from God in the first place, but fear keeps us apart. Whenever angels or messengers reveal God's message to human beings, they start with, "Don't be afraid." Fear messes with our heads; it gets in the way of what we know is true. We aren't talking about the fear of God here; the fear of God is realizing the awesomeness of who God is and what He does and our humble status in comparison to Him. The fear that stops Peter dead in his tracks is something else entirely.

We need to realize just what an incredible guy Peter was. He was brave and daring. He was the first one to call Jesus the long-awaited Christ, the savior. He's the only person other than Jesus to walk on water. He had his sword ready to protect Jesus when the mob came in last week's passage. When the other disciples fled, Peter follows the mob to the high priest's house! He had far more courage than I would have had.

So why would this man, a tough fisherman, a take-no-prisoners kind of guy, suddenly deny Jesus three times? He's faced with real fear. In the courtyard of the high priest, Peter can hear Jesus being mocked and beaten. Peter's worst fears are being realized, and it hits him that he could be in real danger, that he could in fact die for being Jesus' follower. What's funny is that he denies knowing Jesus, but he still sticks around. I think it's because he wasn't all that worried about a single servant girl IDing him in the middle of the night with barely any light. It's another when more and more people around the fire recognize him. The pressure to hide and deny becomes greater and greater. Peter's scared.

Now Peter is not a coward by nature. Why does he lose his confidence so thoroughly after bragging hours before that he would go with Jesus both to prison and to death? It goes back to something from last week's passage that now comes into play: Peter didn't pray. While Jesus knelt before the Father in His darkest hour, Peter slept, despite being warned by Jesus that he needed to be praying. It seems like such a small thing, but prayer is what keeps us in step with the Father's will for us. It gives us confidence in God's direction and keeps us from fear, even in the hardest circumstances. God empowers us through prayer.

Fear is what keeps people from becoming Christians and keeps Christians from being effective Christians. Many people reject the church because of their fears...that they'll be rejected and ridiculed by their friends, that they'll wind up as some sort of hyperfundamentalist, that they'll have to stop thinking critically, that without sin all the fun will be gone out of life...the biggest one, perhaps, is the fear that comes from having to admit being wrong. These same kind of fears hit the Christian who decides to witness for Jesus...will this person hate me? Will they beat me up? Will they think I'm stupid? Will I lose my friend if I tell them about Christ? These are real fears, but ones that deny God's will for us to spread His name.

This last week, two guys in an old beat up car were playing basketball in the parking lot. My first instinct was to go inside and not to bother them. They came to shoot some hoops, not to talk with the pastor. But it was also out of fear...who are these kids? Are they going to think I'm crazy going out to talk to them? My gut said to stay in my office, but the Spirit led me to talk with them. I invited them to play here any time, to come inside to use the restroom and get a drink – which they did. I was able to talk with one of them, and he told me about his worries with school and getting a job and working on his car trying to get by. We slowly started to create a friendship. I don't know if they'll ever make it into the church or become Christians, but making that step out for me was a big deal. It may sound crazy to think that a pastor has problems meeting people, but we still have to fight the fear too.

The one thing we can count on is God. God wants for this to happen; He wants us to make disciples. His scripture tells us over and over that if we ask Him for something, He'll give it! So when you are in Peter's place, when you have the opportunity to proclaim or deny Christ, ask for courage. Ask for the words to say. Ask for Him to get you past your fear. Hebrews 13:6 says, "We say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"" Peter himself writes to us in 1 Peter 3:14-16, "But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

The second thing we see in the passage is repentance. When Peter wept bitterly after the denials, the Greek gives the sense of total loss. Peter doesn't explain away or rationalize his actions. He doesn't say, "You know, I was under a whole lot of pressure." He breaks down. He knows he has denied his Lord, and his failure cuts him to his core. He doesn't know how to deal with it, but he knows his guilt and is deeply ashamed. This is not who he wants to be. Even as he flees the scene, he has begun the process of repentance.

Turning away from sin is at the heart of the gospel. We must come to grips with it if we are to be true Christians. Repentance is the first major sign of becoming spiritual people. Repentance is not the *ability* to turn from sin necessarily; sin is a sickness, an addiction, and God is the only one who can break its power. But repentance is genuine sorrow over one's sins and taking responsibility for them, desiring to put them aside for good.

The world loves excuses. We hear them every day. Each week brings new ones – right now we hear them about an oil slick that's turning the sea to sludge and the separation of Al and Tipper Gore – but they aren't new at all. They're the same as the old – "he did it she did it they did it; I'm not responsible; I'm happier now; I needed fulfillment; I wasn't satisfied; it felt good; I liked it; it's not really all that bad; who has the right to judge me anyway?" But excuses don't heal. Excuses don't sew back together torn families or mend broken hearts. The responsibility it takes to admit one's guilt, to repent, the ability to say, "I did it and I'm genuinely sorry and I want to make amends," those are signs that we are heading in God's direction.

But the third and most important point of the story is forgiveness. It might seem strange because we don't find it in the passage itself. John's gospel is the only one that details it. But we have to remember that when the gospels were written, Peter was already the leader of the church in Jerusalem. To have access to a copy of a gospel meant you were linked to a local church somehow, and Peter's role was common knowledge. His position was important enough that, within a few hundred years, it morphed into what we now know as the role of pope within the Catholic church. Of the twelve disciples, he was by far the most visible representative.

The book of Acts shows Peter taking the lead. The Holy Spirit comes to the disciples on Pentecost, and Peter is the first one out preaching the good news. 5,000 people became believers that day due to his words. He travels where the Spirit directs, preaching as he goes; eventually, the Spirit guides him to reach out to the Gentiles with the gospel. Peter is always named first in every listing of the apostles in the New Testament. No other New Testament figure save perhaps Paul was more influential in the early church.

If that's the case, then, the story of Peter's denial is not about condemning failure but about the amazing forgiveness of God. In Matthew 10:32-33, Jesus says, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven." Peter did exactly this. He knows the weight of his actions; he has done no less than disown Jesus three times. Peter is hopeless. And yet Jesus forgives him. Not only does Jesus forgive him, but He makes Peter into the leader of His church! This man who out of all the apostles explicitly denied him, Jesus forgave to the fullest.

This is the reason the story appeared in all four gospels. If the man Jesus re-named "the rock," who was the visible leader of the earthly church, the one to whom Jesus said, "I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven," if he could fail so spectacularly and still repent and receive forgiveness, then everyone can. It is impossible to be so far gone that God cannot reach out to you and save you. The woman at the well married five times, the tax collector, the woman caught in adultery, the denying Peter – all forgiven. Jesus' ministry was not to those who already considered themselves righteous, but to those who knew they had sinned and fallen short of God's law. He came to rescue those who knew they could not rescue themselves.

That truth is still with us today, calling us to turn from sin and turn to Jesus. He will forgive. There is no doubt. The number of sins you've committed or the awfulness of them doesn't matter. Forgiveness is still there. If you've never gone before the LORD in prayer and confessed your sins and asked for forgiveness and asked Him to change your heart so that you might follow Him, do it today. It's not too late. There's nothing He won't forgive.

There's one final thing we must also remember when we talk about forgiveness, and that's restoration. Peter was not forgiven and then relegated to a backroom somewhere sorting mail. He led the entire church with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He showed his repentance and his faith through his actions, Jesus restored him, and he became the leader Jesus always knew he would be.

Not every situation calls for restoration into the same position. If somebody stole money from the till, it'd be silly to put them into the position of treasurer. Nor is everyone who asks for it ready for forgiveness and restoration. Real repentance has to occur before forgiveness and reconciliation can take place. But when it does, our call is to forgive and reconcile and restore. It is painful to forgive someone who has hurt us, but it's even more painful to trust that person again. But that is our call as Christians. Jesus trusted Peter with nothing less than His church. When someone in our midst sins, we must confront that sin, but with an eye not towards condemnation but forgiveness, renewal, and restoration.

Peter's denial of Christ shows us that he was very human. Jesus didn't choose people who were smart or brave or kind or loving to be His disciples; He chose ordinary people like you and me and transformed them into smart, brave, kind, loving people who would model and speak the love of God to the whole world. We have the opportunity to be those disciples to this generation. Even if we've fallen into sin and our faith has flagged, Jesus is ready to take those sins from us and restore us and love us into people who glorify Him with every thought and word and deed.