



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 18: 15-27

Summer 2023

"Peter In Denial"

TRANSCRIPT

Well, we are in John 18, and we're going to read something of what we read last week because there are really two events going on here at the same time. We covered the first phase of the Lord's trial last week in the palace of Annas. Now we're going to look at that event but also the events that were taking place in the courtyard outside. So we begin in verse 15 and go through verse 27,

¹⁵ Simon Peter was following Jesus, and *so was* another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, ¹⁶ but Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷ Then the slave-girl who kept the door said to Peter, "You are not also *one* of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." ¹⁸ Now the slaves and the officers were standing *there*, having made a charcoal fire, for it was cold and they were warming themselves; and Peter was also with them, standing and warming himself.

¹⁹ The high priest then questioned Jesus about His disciples, and about His teaching. ²⁰ Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. ²¹ Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; they know what I said." ²² When He had said this, one of the officers standing

nearby struck Jesus, saying, "Is that the way You answer the high priest?" ²³ Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?" ²⁴ So Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You are not also *one* of His disciples, are you?" He denied *it*, and said, "I am not." ²⁶ One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" ²⁷ Peter then denied *it* again, and immediately a rooster crowed.

John 18: 15-27

Now, I'm going to read one more text, parallel to the one that Seth read, but this is Hebrews chapter 2, verses 17 and 18,

¹⁷ Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word, and bless our time in it together. Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, we thank You for Your goodness to us. We thank You for the blessings You bestow on us, blessings we're not even aware of so much of the time. We have comfortable lives, particularly in this age in which we live. We take things for granted. Maybe it's our health; we take that for granted. We can even take this for granted; being with Your people on a Sunday morning. This is the great privilege we have. We are privileged above so many people in this world as we come together in this place, we open Your Book, the Bible, the unique Word of God, and we learn about reality.

We learn about You, we learn about ourselves. We learn about our condition and how weak we are—and we learn about the solution, which is found in Your Son.

Father, You impart wisdom to us through this. You give us maturity in life, in the spiritual life, through Your Word. So we ask that You would bless us this morning, build us up in the faith. We pray that You would move us more in maturity. That's a slow, slow process, this work of sanctification; but it happens through what we are doing at this moment; through the study of Your Word, through prayer, and through fellowship with the saints.

So LORD, we pray Your blessing upon us spiritually—and bless us materially, physically. If we're not experiencing some health issue now it's because of Your grace; Your goodness to us. We have so much good in this life, and we take it for granted, Father, we confess that every moment of life is a gift from You, and every pleasant moment in life is a gift from You—and the trials in life are really a gift from You because You use those to shape our lives; and our character, as well.

It's chiefly through the Word of God that You do that, and we pray now, LORD, that You'd bless us as we will turn our attention to this text of Scripture. Teach us the lessons here and prepare our hearts for that with our next hymn. And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

(Message) In his book, *Devoted To God*, Sinclair Ferguson wrote, "My first boss, when I was a very young minister, trumpeted from the high pulpit, 'Few great men finish well.' " When Ferguson heard that, he wrote that, "He got a sinking feeling. It was a word of warning."

Why is that, that 'few great men finish well'? Oftentimes it's because people, mature people, try to live in two worlds at the same time—and that's impossible. In logic, it is 'the law of the excluded middle', which states that, 'Everything must either be or not be. There's no in-between. The middle is excluded.'

And that's true in the Christian life; we cannot be both devoted to Christ, and not devoted to Him. We can't both abide in Christ and abide in the world. That's an

'excluded middle' —an impossibility. When we try to do that, (take the middle way), we compromise our faith and inevitably have a fall.

And yet many Christians try to do just that. Sometimes even great ones. Peter is one who did. When he followed Christ into the courtyard of the high priest and then began warming himself at the fire of the Lord's enemies, he tried to be a disciple of Jesus. He tried to be a friend of Jesus and a friend of the world; have its warmth and be loyal to Christ. —And as a result, he had a mighty fall.

It's a sad passage in the Bible, but the Bible is filled with such stories. It is not a *hagiography*, an idealized biography—or a story of the saints which only presents the positive view or picture of them and neglects the negative. No, the Bible is brutally honest and paints its best people, in the words of Oliver Cromwell, "warts and all". We read of Noah becoming drunk; David committing adultery; Jeremiah getting angry with God. Every kind of failure and weakness that is common to man, we find written of God's people

Which testifies to the integrity of the Scriptures. They are a record of reality; they set forth 'true-to-life' accounts of things. And for a purpose: That we might learn about ourselves; that we might learn of our weakness; that 'our sufficiency is not in ourselves, it is in the LORD, and the LORD alone'. (2Cor 3:5). And by learning of other's failures, we might avoid them ourselves.

So, we have this account of Peter's fall. It's found in all four Gospels, so it had a profound effect upon the early church. And it is like a beacon set up in Scripture to prevent us from making shipwreck of our faith.

But there's more to this passage than Peter. It's also about Christ; He predicted Peter's failure. He told Peter that he would deny Him three times. And the other Gospels record Peter's objection: he said he would never fall away, "Even if I have to die with You," he said, "I will not deny You." (Mat 26:35 & Mar 14:31). But his denial of the Lord

proved the Lord true; and demonstrated His advanced knowledge of His sufferings and death, and His control over all of the events that unfolded.

So all of this verifies the truth of our Lord. It reveals His deity. —But it also gives us a sense of what the Lord suffered and the isolation that He experienced. His disciples had either deserted Him or disowned Him. He had been abandoned by all, which draws attention to the greatness of His sufferings for us.

But in that very fact there are some comforting implications for us. Just as Peter's failure gives us a warning, Christ's sufferings encourage us because having suffered so, He can sympathize with us when we pass through similar experiences.

In chapter 18 Jesus, our great high priest, stands before the Jewish high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. And what a contrast this gives us: Men who cared only for themselves, and Christ, the selfless servant, the good shepherd. He lives for us; He died for us. He is pure. He understands what we experience and He knows perfectly the solution for us—and prays for that. Both lessons: One of failure and one of help, are here.

Now all of this began when Jesus was arrested and led away. (Jn 18:12-13). His disciples fled into the night, probably escaping over the Mount of Olives to Bethany to find shelter there with friends—but Peter didn't follow them. He probably didn't go far before he stopped and decided to turn around and follow the soldiers back into Jerusalem, to see what would happen to the Lord.

Now that took some courage; and it showed genuine love for the Lord because he followed the company all the way to the most dangerous part of the city, the palace of the high priest. When he arrived, the entrance into the courtyard was closed. But Peter had a contact on the inside, a person identified in verse 15 as “another disciple”, who was known to the high priest. He had entered with Jesus and, because of his connection, was able to speak to the door keeper and get Peter in.

John is often identified as this 'other disciple', which is consistent with the anonymous way he refers to himself throughout this fourth Gospel as, for example, describing himself as the disciple, "whom Jesus loved." (Jn 13:23). And since Peter and the beloved disciple are often together in the Gospel of John, it's reasonable to assume that this 'other disciple' here is that same disciple, the apostle John.

In which case, he and Peter had followed Jesus and the soldiers back to Jerusalem to the palace of the high priest. But only John was allowed in because of his acquaintance with the high priest. Peter was left standing outside until John could arrange for him to enter. John may have gone on into the courtroom to observe the trial that was taking place there, while Peter remained alone outside.

Peter was obviously nervous when he entered; the palace and the courtyard were unfamiliar surroundings to him and he had only recently struck the servant of the high priest, Malchus, and cut off his ear. Now he was in the very courtyard of the high priest—enemy territory; and he must have felt threatened. Maybe the doorkeeper sensed that. She was a "slave-girl", we are told, and she was curious about Peter; he looked familiar to her. And so to clear up her doubt she asked, "Are you not also *one* of this man's disciples, are you?" (vs17).

It wasn't a particularly hostile question. It wasn't an accusation; in fact, it suggests uncertainty about his identity. The question is worded in such a way that it expects the answer 'No', which really made it easy for Peter to answer in that way and escape an uncomfortable situation; 'You are not one of His disciples, are you?' "I am not." he said. (vs17). But for all of the confidence that Peter showed in the upper room, (that he was ready to lay down his life for Christ), Peter lost his nerve before a slave-girl, and denied Jesus for the *first* time.

But sin is a slippery slope. And having done it once, it would be all the easier to do it a second time, and a third time. So Peter begins, what one commentator calls, "his shameful descent."

It was a cold night. Oriental palaces were built around an open courtyard and so to keep warm, the servants and officers of the high priest made a charcoal fire and were standing around it when Peter joined them. John describes it in verse 18, "...and Peter was also with them, standing and warming himself." Ominous words.

Ominous because it is similar to the description that John gave of Judas earlier, when he led the soldiers into the garden to arrest Jesus. He wrote, "And Judas also...was standing with them." (Jn 18:15). Now Peter 'was standing with them'—and hardly distinguishable from Judas, for he was 'warming himself with the enemy.'

Matthew Henry wrote long ago, "Those that warm themselves with evil doers grow cold toward good people and good things. And those that are fond of the devil's fireside are in danger of the devil's fire." That's where Peter was: Standing with the enemy while Jesus was standing alone, being interrogated by the high priest.

In verses 19 through 24, John goes back to the trial where Jesus was questioned about His disciples and about His teaching—and where He was struck, slapped, by one of the officers. In spite of the abuse, the Lord didn't return evil for evil, insult for insult; He remained completely calm at every moment. He didn't answer Annas' question about the disciples. He continued to protect them even though they had all deserted Him—and Peter was outside denying Him.

Then, in the next verses, John returns to the fire where Peter was warming himself. By moving back and forth between these two scenes, he makes a very clear contrast between the Lord and His disciples: Jesus bravely stands up to His questioners; He doesn't deny anything, while Peter withers before the questioner and denies our Lord—denies his association with Him.

The *second* denial comes in verse 25 where those gathered around the fire said to him, "You are not also *one* of His disciples, are you?" The question is almost identical to the first one in verse 17. And John records the same answer. Peter said, "I am not."—and he hoped that that would end it all. But then one of the slaves of the high priest,

a relative of Malchus, begins to ask the question, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" And we read, "Peter then denied *it* again." (vs 26-27).

Now, John gives a very tame summary of what Peter said. Matthew states that, "Then he began to curse and swear, 'I do not know the man!' " (Mat 26:74). At that moment he wanted nothing to do with Christ. Satan told God, before he afflicted Job, "Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life." (Job 2:4), —and Peter seemed to be proving that here. He would give anything, even Christ, (if that were possible), in order to save his skin. Fortunately for Peter, Jesus was not willing to give up Peter.

Then John wrote, "...and immediately a rooster crowed." (Jn 18:27b). Luke tells us more—in fact, I don't think Hollywood could invent a more dramatic moment than the one that actually took place in that courtyard. Luke wrote that when this happened, the Lord appeared, probably in the courtyard, (evidently he was being transferred from the house of Annas to the house of Caiaphas), and while Peter was denying the Lord for the *third* time, he heard the rooster crowing. And then, Luke writes, "The Lord turned and looked at Peter." Their eyes met. And Luke wrote, "Peter remembered the word of the Lord...'Before a rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly." (Luke 22:60-62).

But that pang of sorrow was the beginning of his repentance and restoration. Earlier in the evening Luke records that the Lord warned Peter of the great trial that lay ahead of him: "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded *permission* to sift you like wheat;" (Luke 22:31). Satan can do that; he would do it; for all of Peter's self-confidence, he was no match for Satan. None of us is. —And he would make a wreck of Peter; "...but," the Lord said, "I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." (ibid:22).

[That word "*turned*" is used in the Old Testament. The word, '*sûb*', *turn*, means *repent*. So, 'When you've *repented*', 'when you've *turned* again', ('turned to the truth'), "*strengthen your brothers.*"]

The sound of the rooster, the sight of Christ, caused Peter to recall the Lord's warning and to begin *to turn*, with the result that he would later be a help to others who stumbled along the way.

Now all of this gives us some understanding of the doctrine of 'the perseverance of the saints.' That doctrine doesn't mean that the believer will never stray. The doctrine states: 'The saints will persevere to the end.' But it doesn't mean they won't stumble along the way, and that they'll never displease the Lord; or that they never will grieve the Holy Spirit. We do, do that. Just like Peter, Christians fall into sin and continue in sin for a time, (and they may show little difference during that period from an unbeliever). And while Peter stood with the enemy, he didn't appear to be very different from Judas.

But for all of Peter's denials, he never denied his confession of faith which was: 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.' He *only* denied his association with Him—I say '*only*', but that was a very significant thing he did...and it verges on the worst. But he did not deny his faith, and the faith of a true believer will never fail.

And the reason for that is the same reason that Peter's faith did not fail—because 'Christ prayed for him'. And His praying for us assures us that we will finally persevere. Our continuance in faith is due to the Triune God. It is due to the sovereignty of God and the love of God—to God's electing grace; to the prayers of Christ; and the abiding, continuing, always present, ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Triune God keeps us saved, and keeps us believing and persevering. And we persevere because of that—and because of grace alone. Grace, which is so great, that it even turns our failures to our advantage as it did with Peter. He would come out of it wiser and able to "strengthen" others.

Still, we wonder, 'How could such a thing happen?!' We can explain the Lord's betrayal by Judas; 'he was a devil.' Jesus exposed him as that in chapter 6, verse 70. But Peter was not. Peter was a saint. Peter was genuine. He had given that great

confession in Matthew 16:16, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." So how did it happen that he came to behave so much like Judas, "the son of perdition?" (Jn 17:12).

Well, I think the answer is found in a series of steps that Peter took, steps that all of us can follow if we are not alert. The *first* one occurred before Peter ever set foot in the courtyard; he began *overconfident*. Jesus told him plainly, only hours before, that 'he would deny Him, and he would not only deny Him once, he would deny Him three times.' —That's pretty specific. (Jn 13:38). That's the Lord speaking to Peter and explaining what was going to happen.

Peter almost scoffed at the idea and said he was 'ready to die for Christ', (Jn 13:37), and certainly wouldn't deny Him. I suppose that's what he thought he was doing when he cut off Malchus' ear. He may even have felt that he proved his valor, and proved the Lord's prediction false. It was a courageous thing he did, (but absolutely foolish); and he went off to the house of Annas feeling self-confident along the way. Maybe before he entered that courtyard, he felt himself to be invulnerable. Well, all of that soon evaporated, once he was in the courtyard, and the slave-girl came.

We all have gifts, we all have strengths, but it's all of the sovereign grace of God. In and of ourselves, we are weak, we are 'dust and ashes', as Abraham said. (Gen 18:27). The first step to avoiding a terrible fall is to realize that. Someone wisely said that, "The best of men are men at best." That's true; we need to realize it. Peter, in his self-confidence, ignored the Word of God.

Secondly, Peter didn't pray. Earlier in the garden, Jesus asked three of His disciples; James, John, and Peter, to stand guard in the Garden of Gethsemane. He then falls down on the ground, weeping and praying earnestly for the LORD to remove this cup, if it's possible. It was a crucial moment in the life of our Lord, coming to this crucial, all important decision in His human nature. He asked them, 'to stand guard', as it were—and they slept. And so Jesus said, "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Mat 26:41).

But Peter didn't do that; he slept again, and granted it had been a long night and he was just overcome with sleep. [Maybe you've had that experience; you sometimes just can't keep your eyes open. I think that's where Peter was.] Nevertheless, he did not follow the Lord's instruction. We need a good prayer life. We need to keep watching and praying. And one of the greatest incentives to doing that is realizing how weak we are—and how dangerous this world is. We need to be watching and praying. We need to guard against overconfidence.

Thirdly, Peter 'followed Jesus from a distance'. Mark wrote that, Mark 27, verse 55. And we're tempted to do that: 'To not be too public' in our relationship with the Lord. It's being cautious—but it's being foolish. Actually, as James Boice wrote, "The closer we are to Christ, the safer we are." Well, 'Peter followed from a distance.'

The *fourth* step in Peter's fall occurred when he moved from 'following Jesus from a distance', to 'standing close to His enemies.' That's true of us when we identify more with the culture we live in than with Christ. It's the problem of worldliness; of desiring the things of the world more than the things God; of trying to get our satisfaction and abundance from the world and its ways, at the expense of God's way.

Peter is a picture of that: Standing by the enemy's fire on that cold night and seeking his warmth and comfort from the devil's fireside. But it didn't last—and Peter soon fell. He was trying to do the impossible: To live in two worlds at the same moment trying to have "*the excluded middle*" —we can't do it.

A person can *try* to live a full and successful life, an abundant life, in one of three ways—but can *do it* only in one way. And you can illustrate this for yourself by going to a mall or to a building that has an escalator. (And I think I got the inspiration for this illustration from two sources. One is Charles Spurgeon and the other is my youth, because these are the things I used to do.)

First, go over to that escalator and put one foot on the first moving step, and keep the other foot on the floor...You'll find that your comfort level rapidly decreases and it won't be long before you take a fall. Now you wonder, "Who would do such a stupid thing like that?" Well, I think I did it!...but Peter for one; and Christians, when they try to live like the world *and* live like a disciple. It can't be done. They will never reach fulfillment in that way.

A second thing to do is to keep both feet on the floor and never get on the escalator, (and never leave the ground floor). That's how the world lives. It has nothing to do with Christ; and in many ways it seems to get along all right. Asaph thought so; he wrote of that in Psalms 73 and 'How the wicked prosper and enjoy life, while the righteous suffer.' The man of this world will have the pleasures of this world, but never go beyond them. And very soon, all of those pleasures; and all of those things; and all of those houses; and all of those cars; and all of that *whatever*; acclaim and popularity...is gone! His life is gone; and life is over so quickly.

Well, a third thing to do is get on the escalator with both feet, and let it take you to the top; and the third way illustrates the only way for the Christian to live: Wholly devoted to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit—without compromise! We don't always do that, though. In fact, we often fail, as Peter did.

But fortunately for us, Jesus is never finished with us. We see that at the end of this Book, in chapter 21, when the Lord comes to the disciples in Galilee, meets them by the Sea of Galilee at the shoreline and fixes breakfast for them. He was there to regather His disciples; but He was also there, in particular, for Peter, to restore His disciple to service. Three times He has Peter affirm his love for Him, and three times the Lord tells Peter, "Tend my lambs." (vs15). Peter had wronged Him greatly, but the Lord gladly received him back and restored him to fellowship and service.

And He does that with us; He picks us up when we fall and tells us to follow Him. He deals with us like the good shepherd that He is; tending His lambs and doing so with great sympathy. He is a merciful and faithful high priest—and one reason is because He

experienced the trials that we go through. Through Peter's lapse, we learn what the Lord suffered for us; the isolation He experienced. Not only did His disciples desert Him, but when given the opportunity, they denied Him, denied their friendship with Him. Peter did—and he even accented his denial with curses. And Jesus knew it all, yet it didn't make Him bitter. He is our sympathetic high priest.

Have you ever experienced loneliness? Have you ever been abandoned by friends. Christ knows what that is like—and He sympathizes. Have you ever been slapped, mistreated, deeply offended by something that someone has said or done? The Lord has too.; He knows what it is to be unjustly treated. He experienced temptation, disappointment and abuse to the fullest—yet He did not sin in any of that.

So, He sympathizes with us, and is able to help us wisely in time of need. So, we have One far greater than we are, who cares about us and prays for us. Now, that's reason for great encouragement.

Still, we need to be diligent about our lives and our walk with the Lord. If it's true that, 'few great men finish well', how much more do the rest of us need to be vigilant and run the race; looking to Jesus, "the author and perfecter of faith"? (Heb 12:2). By God's grace, we'll do that. By God's grace, we will stand firmly with Him. And as we do, we will discover that Jesus Christ never disappoints us.

But there may be some here without Christ, someone who has not believed in Him, who doesn't really know who He is, doesn't know and believe that He is the Son of God—who entered this world to die for sinners and save them. Your problem is not the one that we've seen here in our passage—one of compromise, cowardice, and failing to be a consistent disciple. Peter *appeared* to be like Judas. You are like Judas, "the son of perdition", whose end was damnation. It's serious—it's that serious. That's your end.

So come to Christ. He is the Savior of all who do. The moment you believe, you're forgiven, you're clothed in His righteousness, and given everlasting life—and the Spirit of God to walk with you to live within you and enable you to live a wise and fruitful life.

May God help you to do that and bless all of us with constancy in our faith and in our love for the Lord.

(Closing prayer) Father, we certainly know that, "Our sins, they are many, Your mercy is more." We know that from experience. We know that from the revelation of Your Word. We see ourselves in Peter and his failure. We confess we're no better, and we thank You that You're faithful to us and show great mercy and grace. We praise You and thank You for that. We pray that You would strengthen each and every one of us; equip us, as You have; enable us to fight the good fight; and as we go out into this dark world in which we live, to be good and faithful witnesses to Him and to Your grace—to our Triune God.

So we thank You, Father, for calling us and blessing us.

Now, the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. We pray this in the name of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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