

“He Went out and Wept Bitterly” (Luke 22:54–62)

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Brian Watson

Last week, I asked us how we respond when we are hurt or attacked. What comes out of us during those moments of great pressure reveal what is inside of us.

That’s a very important point. But there’s something else we should think about. What happens when we’re the ones who fail? What do we do when we do what is wrong? In other words, what do we do with our failure, our mistakes, our sins? When we do what is wrong, how can we move forward? Is there hope for us? Can we be forgiven of serious failures?

Well, Christianity says there is great hope for sinners. This is why we refer to the central message of Christianity as the gospel, which simply means good news. Though we fail, God is able and willing to forgive his children.

We will see this today as we continue to look at the Gospel of Luke. We’ll see what happens when Peter fails. Though this passage doesn’t give us the full story, we can look to other parts of the Bible to see what happened to Peter after he failed.

So, without further ado, let’s turn to Luke 22:54–62. While you’re turning there, I just want to remind us that this passage is among one of many that is set on the night before Jesus died, the night he was betrayed and arrested. Last week, we saw that Jesus was arrested. Peter tried to defend Jesus with the sword, but Jesus told him not to do that. The disciples fled at Jesus’ arrest (Matt. 26:56). But Peter trailed behind Jesus and the Jewish leaders who arrested him, and Luke’s attention now turns to Peter.

Let’s now read Luke 22:54–62:

⁵⁴ Then they seized him 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.” ⁵⁸ And a little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not.” 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.” ⁶⁰ But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about.” And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. 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.”⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.¹

Peter follows Jesus and those who arrested him from the Garden of Gethsemane back into Jerusalem, to the high priest’s house. Why was Peter following Jesus? We’re not told. Did he think he could take his sword out again and free Jesus? Did he simply want to see what would happen? We don’t know. But it seems like Peter wanted to do the right thing. He didn’t simply run away from danger, from the Jewish leaders who were hostile to Jesus and who would surely be hostile to Jesus’ disciples. Peter could have done that, and that would have been the safest thing to do. Instead, Peter follows Jesus and his captors from a distance.

While waiting in the courtyard, Peter tries to blend with other people who are warming themselves by a fire. Then, he is noticed. A servant sees Peter, recognizes him, and says, “This man was also with him.” If Peter said, “You’ve got that right!” he might have been arrested and put on trial alongside Jesus. Peter must have recognized the danger. So, in that moment of pressure, he lies to save his own skin.

Shortly thereafter, another person recognizes Peter as one of Jesus’ disciples. Now, Peter could have told the truth at that point, and confessed that he lied earlier. But as is so often the case, once we tell lies, instead of admitting what we have done, we double down in our dishonesty. I remember when I was a kid there used to be a public service announcement that played among commercial breaks of cartoons. And that PSA said something like, “When you tell one lie, it leads to another. So, you tell two lies to cover each other. Then you tell three lies, then, oh brother, you’re up to your neck in lies.”

After that second lie, about an hour goes by. Now, you might think that Peter would come to his senses, realize that he has twice denied Jesus, and resolve to tell the truth, no matter the consequences. But he doesn’t do that. Again, he is recognized. This time, someone figures out that Peter is from Galilee, just like Jesus, and infers that Peter must be one of Jesus’ followers. Peter says quite strongly that he doesn’t know Jesus. In Matthew’s Gospel, it says, “he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, ‘I do not know the man’” (Matt. 26:74).

At that moment, a rooster crows, Jesus looks at Peter from a distance, and Peter remembers what Jesus had predicted. Earlier in this same chapter of Luke, Jesus told Peter that Peter would deny him. This is what we read in Luke 22:31–34:

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

³¹ “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” ³³ Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.” ³⁴ Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”

And, sure enough, Jesus’ prediction comes to pass. Peter denies knowing Jesus three times.

We don’t know what kind of look Jesus gave Peter. Was it a look of sadness, of sorrow that a friend would deny even knowing him? It probably wasn’t a look of “I told you so.”

Whatever it was, Peter remembered what Jesus had said, and left, weeping bitterly.

I think this episode is important for a number of reasons, primarily for what it teaches us about failure. If you’re like me, in moments of pressure and even in moments of panic, you might have done the wrong thing. You might have had many moments of failing to do the right thing when you’ve felt under pressure. And you might feel a great sense of guilt and shame because of your failure. But there is hope, and I think that is why the Gospel writers tell us about Peter and his failure.

I want to make a number of observations about this passage and about other passages that discuss Peter. The first is one that I made a few weeks ago when we read about how Jesus predicted Peter’s failure. Jesus chose twelve men to be his disciples, his inner ring of followers who would become his apostles, his authorized messengers. (Judas, who betrayed Jesus, was later replaced by Matthias.) Jesus chose men who were not perfect. They were not the most righteous, the most religious, the richest and most powerful men. They weren’t stupid, but they were also not elite scholars. They were people that were a bit like you and me.

When Jesus called Peter to follow him, Peter at first thought he was unworthy. In Luke 5, Jesus tells Simon Peter to follow him. After Jesus performed a miracle to demonstrate his divine power, Peter told him, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). What kind of sin did Peter have in his life? We don’t know. But if he is anything like you and me, there were some things he had done that bothered him, moral failures of which he was ashamed. He must have thought that the things he had done would disqualify him from serving someone like Jesus in any kind of official capacity.

But Jesus deliberately chose Peter. Jesus knew that Peter was a sinful man. And Jesus also knew that Peter would sin again. As we have already seen, Jesus knew that Peter would deny him. Yet Jesus chose this man to be the leader of this band of twelve brothers. And that is a

picture of grace. God uses imperfect people as his servants. He uses people who have failed, people who have cracked under pressure. We might say God uses cracked and broken vessels to carry his perfect word to the world. God doesn't have to do this. But God is merciful, not giving us over to what we deserve—at least not immediately. And for those who follow Jesus, putting their trust in him, God forgives all sin. And God doesn't just wipe away that sin. He also gives his children good things that they don't deserve.

So, the first thing to see is that Jesus chose this sinful man to be his servant, knowing his sin, past, present, and future.

The second thing to see is that what Peter did in this episode was truly wrong. It was no small thing to deny knowing Jesus. In Luke 12, Jesus said this:

⁸ And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, ⁹ but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God (Luke 12:8–9).

Peter denied Jesus before men. Jesus says the one who does that “will be denied before the angels of God,” which is a way of saying that God will say, “I don't know that person” on judgment day (Matt. 7:23). It's important that we understand that Jesus means that if one denies Jesus their whole life, they will be condemned. If one ends one's life in a state of denying who Jesus is—Savior, Lord, Son of God—then that person will be condemned. But if it's wrong to deny Jesus for one's whole life, it seems like it's wrong to deny Jesus at any point in one's life. And that's especially true of someone like Peter, who was no casual acquaintance of Jesus. Peter spent two or three years alongside Jesus. Peter was Jesus' student, his brother, and friend. To deny knowing someone whom you actually know very well is a form of betrayal. Peter not only lied, but he separated himself from Jesus in order to protect himself from whatever harm the Jewish leaders might do to him. This was definitely a wrong thing to do.

We might wonder how someone like Peter, who had such privileged access to Jesus, who had seen Jesus' many miracles, who was taught so much by Jesus, could do this. On one level, we could say that Peter panicked. He was scared in that moment. Instead of trusting Jesus, who had predicted what would happen to him, he was tempted to do the wrong thing in order to save himself. I know that I have sinned in moments of panic. There were times when I didn't have a premeditated plan to sin, but when I was afraid and panicked, I did what was wrong. You might say that in those moments, we're not thinking clearly. If Peter thought clearly, he would recall

Jesus' prophecies. He would have remembered Jesus' power and promises. He would have thought, "No matter what these Jewish leaders might do to me, I'll be okay." But there's something about sin that is irrational. It doesn't always make sense.

The third thing we should see is Peter's response to what happened. Though Peter didn't come to his senses during that time when he denied Jesus three times, he did come to his senses immediately after, when the rooster crowed and when Jesus looked his way. At that moment, Peter knew exactly what he had done. And he wept bitterly. That is such a moving moment. And it's something that I can relate to easily. When we sin, and then when we realize what we have done, there is a real bitterness to that realization. Sometimes, that bitterness is immediate. Other times, the bitter realization that we have failed comes later. There are times when it resurfaces again and again, whenever we think of the wrong things we have done.

I wonder if every once in a while, during the rest of his life, Peter thought about what he had done, and a moment of bitter realization reemerged. I also wonder if the apostle Paul had those moments. Even after Jesus rose from the grave, Paul opposed Jesus and his followers for a while. He arrested Christians so that they might be put to death for blasphemy. He approved of the first Christian martyr's death (see Acts 8:1-3). Though Paul had been forgiven of all those sins when he came to see who Jesus really is and to put his trust in him, Paul still thought of himself as the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). I wonder if Peter thought of himself in similar ways, and if every once in a while, whenever his mind thought again of these events, the bitter taste of that memory of his more failure came back into his mouth.

At any rate, sin leaves a bitter taste. At the moment, it feels good. But later, when we realize what we had done, we feel guilty. We're ashamed. We can't believe that we would do something like that. Peter knew what that was like.

Luke doesn't tell us what happened to Peter after this event. Specifically, Luke doesn't give us information about whether Peter was forgiven. He just tells us that Peter ran to the empty tomb after Jesus died and rose from the grave. And in the sequel to his Gospel, the book of Acts, Luke depicts Peter as a leader of the apostles.

But John, in his Gospel, does tell us what happened. After Jesus rose from the grave, Jesus had a conversation with Peter. This is what we read in John 21:15-17:

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him a second

time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.”¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

Why does Jesus ask Peter three times if he loves him? Surely, his asking this question three times mirrors the three times that Peter denied Jesus. Now, Jesus asks Peter to affirm his love for him three times. And though John doesn’t specifically mention forgiveness or reconciliation, we understand that Jesus was forgiving Peter.

But we should also notice this: Jesus was reaffirming Peter’s position as an apostle. As we have already seen, when Jesus prophesied that Peter would deny him, he told Peter to strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:32). And here, Jesus tells Peter to “feed his sheep,” which most likely means that Peter should “feed” Christians “the word of God,” which is their spiritual food.

The point is that though Peter had sinned in a very serious way, he was forgiven, and he retained his position as an apostle. We can easily imagine Jesus forgiving Peter, but saying, “Peter, I love you, and I forgive you for denying me, but you failed your apostle audition. We’re going to have to give your position to someone else.” But Jesus doesn’t just forgive Peter. He continues to use Peter as his servant. Peter didn’t deserve to be an apostle. He hadn’t earned that position. But God is gracious. He gives us gifts. He uses sinners. And that should give us hope. You may feel that you’ve done things that are so wrong that here is no way God can forgive you. Or, you may understand that you’re forgiven, but you still think your sin disqualifies you to serve God. You may think, “Who am I to tell other people about Jesus when I’ve denied Jesus by my behavior?” When that happens, think about Peter.

Another thing that we should think about as we think about Peter is that his life was changed. Though he was a sinful man, and though he certainly sinned in this episode, his grew in faith and obedience. The book of Acts makes that clear. And we know from sources outside of the Bible that Peter would eventually be killed for being a Christian. Roughly thirty-five years after this event, he would not deny Jesus in order to save his life. I’m sure he learned from his sin. I’m sure he was strengthened by the knowledge that though Jesus died, he rose from the grave. Most importantly, the Holy Spirit gave Peter strength that he didn’t possess on his own.

God loves us so much that when we are adopted into his family through faith in Jesus, his Son, he wants us to grow. He doesn’t want us to stay the same. He changes us from the inside

out. And we need to turn away from our old sinful habits. We need to repent. We need to pursue a greater knowledge of God. We need to obey God's commands. God expects that of his children.

But that doesn't mean that Peter never sinned again. I'm sure he did. I'm sure he had moments where he harbored bad thoughts and desires. And we're told elsewhere in the Bible that in another moment of pressure, Peter panicked once again and did the wrong thing.

In one of Paul's letters, Galatians, he tells of an episode where he and Peter were in the city of Antioch, where there was a church that had both Jewish and Gentile Christians. It's hard for us to understand how radical that was. There was a huge divide between Jews and Gentiles. Jewish people thought Gentiles were unclean. This wasn't just some sort of ethnic or racial division. This was also a religious division. But one of the amazing things about Christianity is that people from all kinds of backgrounds become one when they are united to Jesus by faith. In Christ, there is no Jew and Gentile, or black or white, or male and female (to paraphrase Gal. 3:28).

Peter knew that. But when Jewish leaders came to Antioch, he felt pressured to distance himself from Gentiles. He had been eating with them, which was a thing Jewish people didn't do. But when these Jewish leaders came, Peter was afraid of them, or at least of their opinions, and so he stopped eating with the Gentiles. In doing that, he was denying the Gospel. This is what Paul writes in Galatians 2:11–14:

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Peter was acting like a hypocrite, like someone who never really understood the Gospel. And his behavior led another Christian, Barnabas, to act like a hypocrite, too. But Paul confronted Peter and told him he was wrong.

The point is that even after coming to Jesus, we still will fail. Those failures should be fewer in number and not as serious. But still, we wrestle with sin. And there are times when we fail.

Such is the power of sin. In our moments of weakness, when we are scared, when we are tired, when we have taken our eyes off of Jesus, we might panic and do the wrong thing. Sin promises us safety and security. It promises us pleasures. It promises us freedom. These are false promises, but when we're not thinking clearly, we believe them. We fail to trust Jesus and we disobey him. And then we come to our senses once again and taste the bitterness of sin. And that is painful.

When I think about this tendency to fall back into sin, I think about different things. I think about songs. One of my favorite song writers is a man named Tom Waits. He has a beat-up voice and an odd sense of humor, but that's part of what appeals to me. In one of his songs called "Walk Away," he sings these words:

There are things I've done I can't erase.
I want to look in the mirror and see another face.
I said, "never," while I'm doing it again.
I wanna walk away, start over again.

I can relate to that. I can see the things that I've done wrong and desperately want to erase them. I want to be a different person. I wouldn't mind looking at the mirror and seeing another face. I've told myself, "I'm never going to do that again." And then I have.

There's another song I think of, one that was sung by Johnny Cash towards the end of his career. (Though the song was written by Nick Lowe, not Cash.) It's called "The Beast in Me." It seems to describe that inner, sinful self that we try to suppress, but who escapes from his cage to do bad things. There's something inside of us that is like a beast. We try to keep it shut up in its cage. But there are times when it escapes and overcomes us, and we fail.

I also think about prayers. There's a wonderful collection of prayers written by Puritans called *The Valley of Vision*. One prayer in that book is called "Yet I Sin." Here is part of that prayer:

My faculties have been a weapon of revolt
against thee;
as a rebel I have misused my strength,
and served the foul adversary of thy kingdom.
Give me grace to bewail my insensate folly,
Grant me to know that the way of transgressors
is hard,
that evil paths are wretched paths,
that to depart from thee is to lose all good.

All these sins I mourn, lament, and for them
cry pardon.
Work in me more profound and abiding repentance;
Give me the fullness of a godly grief
that trembles and fears,
yet ever trusts and loves,
which is ever powerful, and ever confident;
Grant that through the tears of repentance
I may see more clearly the brightness
and glories of the saving cross.²

In that same collection of prayers, there's another one called "The Dark Guest." "The Dark Guest" is like "The Beast in Me." It says, in part:

Destroy, O God, the dark guest within
whose hidden presence makes my life a hell.
Yet thou hast not left me here without grace;
The cross still stands and meets my needs
in the deepest straits of the soul. . . .
The memory of my great sins, my many
temptations, my falls,
bring afresh into my mind the remembrance
of thy great help, of thy support from heaven,
of the great grace that saved such a wretch
as I am.
There is no treasure so wonderful
as that continuous experience of thy grace
toward me which alone can subdue
the risings of sin within:
Give me more of it.³

These prayers confess to God that hellish nature of sin. They make no excuses for committing sin. Doing what is wrong is evil. We are without excuse. But these prayers cry out to God to bring about repentance. They ask God to destroy this beast within. And these prayers recall God's remedy for sin. "The cross still stands and meets my needs in the deepest straits of the soul." God the Father sent God the Son, who came willingly, to bear the penalty for sin. Jesus died on the cross, experiencing great physical and spiritual pain, in order to pay the penalty of sin for whoever would come to him in faith. This is the way that we are forgiven by God. Even the

² The full prayer can be found here: <https://banneroftruth.org/us/devotional/yet-i-sin>.

³ The full prayer can be found here: <https://banneroftruth.org/us/devotional/the-dark-guest>.

bitter memories of great sins “bring afresh into [our minds] the remembrance of [God’s] great help, . . . of the great help that saved such a wretch as I am.”

If you have felt the bitter taste of sin, if you know that you have done wrong, if you feel the guilt and shame that come along with doing wrong, I urge you to turn to Jesus. He stands ready to forgive us all our sins. All of them. We must trust that this is true. If you are not yet a Christian, turn to Jesus now.

Of course, we must also desire to be changed, to stop living the way we have always lived. But that doesn’t mean we will suddenly become perfect. We will continue to struggle with sin. Christians, if you struggle with sin, or if you struggle with the memory of your sin, turn to Jesus. There may be something in your past that you think of from time to time and think, “How could I do that? How could I do something that bad? How I could do something that I know is wrong? What was I thinking? How could I be that bad of a person?” When that happens, don’t just look back to your sins. Keep looking further back in the past. Look back to something that happened almost two thousand years ago, when the Son of God laid down his life to pay for your sins. Look to Jesus. Look to the cross. When those memories of sin come back, think of what Jesus has done for you. Experience once again God’s cleansing grace. And be thankful.

This is the best of news for failures and losers like you and me. Not long ago, I was reading through 1 Samuel again, and I came across a verse that I must have read several times. But this time, it really stood out. It was 1 Samuel 22:2, and it described the kind of people that started to follow David even before he was king. It says, “And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him. And he became commander over them. And there were with him about four hundred men.” Those in distress, those bitter in soul, found hope in David. How much more should people like that find their hope in the son of David, the true King of Israel, Jesus Christ. He beckons those who are crushed by the weight of sin to come to him and find rest. He will forgive you, cleanse you, restore you, and equip you to serve him.