



# Central Peninsula Church

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## God's Grace for Our Failure

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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Have you ever noticed that sometimes the circumstances of life have a way of forcing you to take a stand? When everything in your life—your circumstances, your relationships, the pressures that surround you—sort of converge in such a way that you're called to step up to the plate and show what you're really made of? Maybe it's in the work place and after months of working on a project you realize that there's something shady at the top and suddenly you're caught in an ethical dilemma that requires you to act. Or maybe you wake up one morning and realize that your marriage is in serious trouble and you need to take some steps to change before it's too late. These are moments that define us; moments when the pressures of life naturally force to the surface what we're really made of.

I read this amazing story about two women who set out on November 13, 2000, to walk, sled, sail and occasionally swim across the continent of Antarctica. For 94 days they covered 1,717 miles, pulling 250-pound sleds full of food and equipment. They endured temperatures as low as minus 30 degrees and winds that gusted up to 100 miles per hour. Their dream was to be the first women to cross the entire continent. But by February 11 they still had 400 miles left to cross an enormous glacier known as the Ross Ice Shelf. By then the conditions were deteriorating and the Arctic winter was about to close in with its 24 hour darkness and unbearable temperatures. And they realized that if they pressed on they would be putting the lives of their support team at risk. So they made the call to abort the expedition. Think about it: that had to have been an extremely painful decision to make, to let go of a life long dream in order to protect the safety of others. But here's what really struck me about this story; it's what one of the women said after they were finally rescued. "For me, exploration is about that journey to the interior, into your own heart. I'm always wondering, how will I act at my moment of truth? Will I rise up and do what's right?"

You know, I thought about this a lot this week, and I realized that for me, and I think for many of us, the times of testing that I remember most are the times when I've failed. Like when I was in the 6th grade playing 3rd base for Kojema Landscaping. It was the bottom of the 9th. Two outs, two men on base—the last game before the playoffs and I was at the plate. I was their only hope and the whole season came down to this. And in four pitches I struck out looking! That was a defining moment

in my athletic career. That was when I decided to be a musician! But there are other defining moments of failure in my life. Like the time when I burned out in ministry and deeply disappointed myself and a whole bunch of people I cared for. Maybe for you this morning it's the humiliation of having washed out in your career, or you carry with you the pain of some moral failure and the shame hangs over your soul like a thick layer of fog. Or maybe as a parent you privately nurse deep regrets wishing you could have been so much more for your kids. Failure of course is the common experience of all of us. Most of us, if we're honest, have a private mental list of those defining moments that turned out to be more like defining failures in our lives. So where do we go when we fail? Where do I turn when the reality of life reveals I'm not all that I want to be?

This morning as we continue to walk with Jesus in these final hours of his life here on earth, we come to a passage that is filled with the tragedy of human failure, along with God's provision of grace for those who have failed.

### I. Peter Denied Him (Luke 22:54-62)

**"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."**

The other gospel accounts tell us that this scene took place in the open air courtyard of the house of the high priest. It's an extremely dangerous place for Peter to be seen; so the text tells us that Peter followed from a

distance as they grabbed Jesus and took him into the house. It was a cold night so Peter joined the household servants as they gathered around a fire, when one of the servant girls said, "This man was with him." Peter denies that he even knows Jesus. "Me, no you've got the wrong guy, I don't even know who that is." Not long after the conversation unfolds and one of the other servants says, "Yeah, yeah, wait a minute, I do remember now...you are one of them, aren't you?" Peter's denial is clear and emphatic. "Look, I am not." Paying attention to detail Luke says that one hour later it comes a third time. Mark tells us it's because of his Galilean accent; someone says, "Wait a minute, this guy was with them. Listen to that. He's definitely from Galilee." This time Peter says, "Look, you've got it all wrong; I don't even know what you're talking about." And then the rooster crows. Can you imagine how Peter must have felt in that instant? As Luke tells it, the rooster crows right on cue. It's as if the heavenly scriptwriter wrote the rooster cue in the special effects notes. There's a line that we sometimes sing that declares the authority of God over all creation that says: "Who has told every lightning bolt where it should go." What a great line from the book of Job. Well here we see Jesus' sovereign authority over roosters because this is exactly what he had told Peter would happen. He said, "Look Peter, I know you think you're a tough guy, but you're going to fail this test and you're going to deny me three times before the rooster crows." Like a grand stage manager God says, "All right, one denial, two denials, Ok, cue the rooster... three!" And right on cue the rooster crows. Then comes the look. We don't know if Jesus looked out the window or maybe they took a break and brought him back outside, but in that instant their eyes meet. Scholars debate what must have been communicated in the brief glance. Was it condemnation? "Peter, you failed me." Was it a guilt trip? "I told you so, I knew this would happen." Was it disgust, rejection? I don't think so. I think what ripped out Peter's heart was a holy dose of divine forgiveness. I think Peter caught just a glimpse of mercy and grace in the eyes of Christ and he became completely unglued. And tough guy Peter, in his defining moment, is reduced to convulsive sobs of failure.

But we have to ask: why did it turn out this way? How did it come to this? Sometimes we have a tendency to interpret a story like this by projecting our own responses under similar circumstances. Peter is in a tremendously dangerous position. If I was in a similar situation I'd be terrified. Peter knew exactly what was happening to Jesus. He had to have known that this was heading towards brutality and execution. To be recognized as one of his close companions

probably would have meant that he would face the same sort of torture and shameful death. So putting ourselves in Peter's shoes we believe that fear was the likely cause of his failure. So it's out of fear that Peter denies that he has anything to do with this man Jesus. It's out of fear that he saves his own skin. It's because he's terrified of the consequences that he covers up and wimps out when his moment of truth arrives.

We relate to this because we've all failed out of fear. Fear of the rejection of others if we do what's right; fear of the consequences if we take an unpopular stand on an issue; fear that if I speak the truth or blow the whistle it's going to cost me in my career. We've all had those moments, haven't we. Moments when fear overcomes us and we fail to say and do what we know we should have said and done.

But nowhere in any of the gospel accounts are we told that Peter was afraid. In fact the collective character profile of Peter suggests that there must be another reason he failed his Lord that night. Peter was a pretty uncomplicated man of action and determination. Remember it was Peter who dared to get out of the boat and take those few steps on the water. It was Peter who tried to talk the Lord out of fishing in Luke 5. It was Peter who tried to protect Jesus from the crowd in Luke 8. It was Peter in Luke 9 who said "Lord, it was good that we were here" to witness the transfiguration "so we can set up three tabernacles or shrines; one for You; one for Moses; and one for Elijah." He was a take charge kind of guy; but in a side note Luke says that Peter "didn't realize what he was saying." Sometimes Peter only opened his mouth to change his feet.

And as we saw last week Peter was Jesus' self appointed bodyguard. His motto was: "Look, you touch my Jesus and I'll break your face." So in an act of sheer courage and stupidity Peter draws his sword and lops off the ear of a Roman guard. There's a very revealing account in the gospel of Matthew where Jesus explains to his disciples that "he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Peter takes Jesus aside and gets into his face and says: "Never Lord, no way; not on my watch; that's not going to happen as long as I'm around." And Jesus replies, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. Peter, don't get in my way; I'm doing the will of the Father; I'm going to the way of the cross for you and for all who have sinned and failed."

So Peter is sneaking around this courtyard looking for any chance somehow, someway, to keep Jesus from this obscene death on the cross. Peter, in his stubborn misdirected determination, was prepared to do everything humanly possible to protect the Son of God. Remember he told Jesus, "If everyone else falls away, you can count on

me. I'll follow you to jail, I'll follow you to the grave." Only one problem; he forgot that Jesus didn't need protecting. He forgot that Jesus was still in charge and that Jesus was absolutely determined to die on the cross. Peter wanted to do God's will his way and he ended up weeping his eyes out in a heap of repentance. He couldn't follow Jesus on the road to surrender. So the rooster crowed right on cue. The defining moment had come for Peter but his own blind determination, misdirected zeal, and stubbornness will cause it to be the defining failure of his life.

Some of us have failed because of fear, because of intimidation, and the desire to avoid a conflict. But some of you know that just like Peter your greatest failures have come because you just wouldn't stand aside and let Jesus lead you in the way of the cross. It might be this very Peter-like strength that has shipwrecked your marriage, damaged your relationship with your kids, caused conflicts at home, in the workplace or at school. And maybe Peter's rooster crow is a wakeup call for you today as well. Determination and courage are great attributes but when they're wrapped up in human pride and self determination it's a sure recipe for spiritual disaster.

But Luke's tragic picture of human failure doesn't end here.

## II. The Guards Abuse Him (vs. 63-65)

**"Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking Him and beating Him, and they blindfolded Him and were asking Him, saying, 'Prophecy, who is the one who hit You?' And they were saying many other things against Him, blaspheming."**

If Peter's failure disturbs us, we see now that it's only a prelude to what follows. The scene turns sick at this point. Luke spares us the details but the brutality is clear. By the way, we know that these Jewish guards are in violation of the standards for the treatment of criminals under Jewish custom. But they're following what was pretty standard procedure in first century Rome. There's a national debate going on in our day about whether or not lethal injection is a humane form of execution. And those who are raising the question want to know if the chemicals that are administered cause too much pain. But that was not the debate in Jesus' day. If there was a debate at all it would be the opposite concern. Are we treating criminals too humanely? What is the most brutal and humiliating way to inflict pain? That's what they wanted to know. Torture was the norm, not the exception to the rule. This of course is how they came up with the cross, certainly one of the most hideous forms of execution ever devised, where the victim would be left like a hanging sack of bloody flesh for everyone to see. A crucified man hanging on the cross was clearly intended to be a deterrent to breaking Roman law.

So these guards are simply following the lead of their culture with complete disregard for the dignity or

comfort of their prisoner. They slap him and mock him. Other gospels tell us that they spit on Jesus, maybe having a spitting contest to see who could hit him in the eye. Then they play a humiliating game of blind man's bluff. They hit him on the face and head, saying: Ok if you're such a great prophet, tell me who hit you that time. This scene just turns my stomach. How could they do that to Jesus? But then it reminds me that I was right there with the guards back when I was in college. When I was in my late teens and early into my twenties, my lofty self serving religion consisted of one part Eastern mysticism, one part existentialism, and one part rock and roll. In college I was one of the favorite students of a very vocal atheist who was the head of the Philosophy department. This guy's greatest delight was to take on young Christian students and embarrass them and hammer away at them intellectually. I remember one day joining in on the fun, taking on this one young Christian (he was probably just brand new in his faith), saying man, how can you possibly believe in this Jesus stuff? He died on the cross and rose from the dead to save me from my sins? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I felt so superior. Just like these blind guards must have felt. Two years later I was driving up to San Francisco in my little Datsun pickup when the rooster crowed in my life through the conviction of the Holy Spirit and I pulled over to the side of the road and wept just like Peter did. I wept long and hard over my sin, over my failure, over the fact that I had refused and abused my savior and Lord. And I wept myself right into the forgiving arms of Jesus. You know what strikes me about this story? It's that Jesus, the God of the universe, the One who created the heavens and earth, also created his abusers. Jesus made the man who slapped him. He formed him in his mother's womb. He put saliva in the mouth of men who spit in his face. And so we have to ask, in the midst of all this humiliation; as the guards were having their sadistic "fun," what was Jesus, the creator of the universe, doing? What was his divine plan? We see it right here: because Jesus was lovingly, graciously, forgivingly, making his way to die for them; to die for us; on the cross. He was determined to take our place. The just one would die for the unjust.

So when we shake our heads at this disgusting scene we need to be certain we also shake our heads at ourselves, because the reason he is there, and the reason he endured it all is because of us, our sin, our brutality, our blind rejection of the King. By the way, even though Peter had fled the scene by this time, this willingness of Christ to suffer abuse on our behalf became the dominant theme of his life and ministry; so much so that he would later write: **"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he**

**entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds (His sufferings) you have been healed and restored to a right relationship with God and His Son”** (1 Peter 2:22-24).

So Jesus was determined to die for failures and abusers. Jesus died for the abused. He suffered the insults, betrayal, and pain in order to identify with us in our own suffering. Jesus knows your journey, every inch of it. And Jesus has suffered with you and for you as he made a way for you for healing and restoration as he faithfully walked this road marked with suffering. Jesus died for failures, abusers and those who have suffered abuse. But what we find next is the most tragic human failure of all.

### **III. The Leaders Condemn Him (v. 66)**

**“At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them.”** Early the next morning, Jesus appears before the religious council, with his face swollen and his hands bound. The disparate factions of Jewish leaders who never agreed on anything had all come together for one common purpose. To condemn Jesus. They knew they had to find a charge against him that would stick in the Roman court. By the way, this so called trial is so irregular that it makes a mockery out of Jewish legal custom and procedure. Legitimate trials always took place at the temple, not in some private chamber. Jesus was tried without the benefit of any defense council. The giving of a verdict was always to be announced two days after the trial. The High Priest was never permitted to issue the pronouncement of guilt. And the whole thing took place on a feast day which was clearly prohibited under Jewish law. Isn't it interesting that these scribes, pharisees and priests who are so consumed with the minute requirements of the law, seem willing to disregard every law in the book if it means getting rid of Jesus. So they press to find a charge that will stick in the Roman court. First they try the straightforward approach in verse 67. “Look, if you are the Christ then tell it to us straight.” Jesus answers: “If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I ask a question, you will not answer.” In other words: “You're not interested in a fair trial. If I told you I was the promised Messiah you wouldn't believe me. Your minds are already made up... and if I asked you a question you wouldn't answer me. There's no due process here so let's not play games.” Then he makes one of the most significant statements in the whole Bible: “But from now on THE SON OF MAN WILL BE SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND of the power OF GOD.”

You can hear the hush in the room. “Wait, did he say what I think he said? He's claiming to be the Son of Man from Daniel chapter 7? The supernatural figure who received authority from God? He's claiming divine authority to enter straight into God's presence and sit at His right hand; In essence to have the same authority as God Himself?”

They lean forward. “Are you the Son of God?” And Jesus answers with a Greek idiom which translated literally is “You have said so.” In a sense the whole Gospel of Luke comes down to this reply which they clearly understood as: “Yes I Am.” They had what they were looking for. Why do we need any more testimony, they say. We've heard it from his own lips! The leadership had failed to find a way to convict him. So Jesus condemns himself. “Yes I am the Son of God.” Jesus sends himself to the cross by his own words. So there he is; denied by Peter, abused by the temple guards, and condemned by the religious elites. Humanity has completely failed him at this point. But there's Jesus—swollen, beaten, denied, and condemned; absolutely determined to make his way to the cross.

Let me ask you this morning. Have you ever failed? In your marriage? In your family? In your private life? Have you ever used your position of power to take advantage of another? Have you ever blindly judged or condemned someone out of self protection and pride? In your defining moments have you discovered that you're not at all the person you want to be? Or maybe the failures of your past hold you hostage to the fear of ever failing again? And somewhere deep inside you've believed the lie that God can't use a failure like you? Well, this word is for you this morning.

We live in the city so we're not all that familiar with chicken sounds around here. Nancy and I went to the island of Kauai to celebrate our 30th anniversary a few weeks ago. And if you've ever been there, you know that Kauai is all country. There are chickens everywhere and let me tell you, roosters still crow on Kauai! But I wonder if we listen closely this morning we might hear the rooster crow for us. And maybe like Peter it's time to stop in your tracks and gaze into the eyes of your savior.

Remember when the rooster crows it doesn't just signal our failure. But it sets us on the road to healing and restoration, just like it did for Peter. Remember the rest of Jesus' words to Peter. “Peter, Satan wants to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed that your faith won't falter. And when you have turned Peter, go and strengthen your brothers.” That's restoration. That's the promise that God's going to restore and use your healed wounds in ways that far exceed what you could have done if you had never failed! That's God's promise to you. So maybe this morning as the rooster crows for you it's simply time to invite him into your failure with his forgiveness, kindness, his mercy and his all sufficient grace.

Peter denied him, the guards abused him, the leaders condemned him. All humanity failed him. But the tragedy of our failure can never tarnish the victory of the Cross of Christ. Where do we go when our defining moments become our defining failures? We go to the cross, weeping over our sin and we ease ourselves into the receiving arms of the one who by the grace of God was determined to love you all the way to the cross.

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