

We live in a society that hates to talk about failure. Laurence Shames in his book, *The Hunger for More*, writes, “No one thinks about the textures, the nuances of failure, because no one wants to think about failure at all. In a society where infidelity, net worth, and ovarian dysfunctions are routinely discussed over dinner, failure remains taboo, an object of superstitious dread, the only F-word not in common parlance.”

But there is one book that unashamedly casts its greatest heroes as men and women who fail. I’m talking about the Bible. Have you ever noticed how much failure is recorded in the Bible? From page to page, the Bible parades the lives of people who at one time or another failed badly. It spares no one. Its greatest heroes—Abraham, Moses, David and Paul—all knew the bitter taste of failure.

The Bible’s honesty about failure in the lives of its heroes tells me two important things about this book: They tell me first that God, not man, wrote it. Man tends to gloss over the sins of his contemporaries. He whitewashes his fellow man, but not God. When God paints the portrait of a man or woman, he paints them warts and all.

But these facts of failure also tell me the God who wrote this book is a God of grace who wants me to learn from the experience of failure. It’s as if God wants to send us a message: failure is part of life. Learn from the failure of these men and women in the Bible. Don’t repeat their mistakes. But also learn from them that failure isn’t always fatal. Far from being the end, failure can be the raw material for a whole new way of living.

### **Background on Peter**

There is no greater example of this than the man we call Peter. For the last few months here at CPC we’ve been studying one of Peter’s letters, but today and next week on Easter Sunday we’re going to examine a critical chapter in his biography.

What do we know about Peter? We know he had a brother named Andrew. We know his hometown was Capernaum, which was located on the northern shore of a big lake called the Sea of Galilee. We know Peter was a fisherman. Not the modern kind of fisherman, lying down and snoozing in a boat on a summer afternoon with his pole up in the air. Peter was a commercial fisherman. His face was weather beaten. His hands were calloused. We know Peter was married because in Dr. Luke’s gospel Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law. And, finally, we know Peter wasn’t

always called Peter. Originally his name was Simon. But Jesus renamed him Peter which means “rock” because he was the first disciple to confess Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. It was on this “rock,” Jesus said, he would build his church.

But Peter wasn’t always so rock-like. In Mark 14, he comes out looking more like a marshmallow. This chapter culminates in the defection of Peter. As Jesus was standing before the high priest, being mocked, punched, spit upon and blindfolded, Peter denied knowing his Lord three times. How could that happen? I’d like to suggest to you that Peter’s failure wasn’t a blowout; it was a slow leak. In fact, when it comes to our spiritual lives, it always is. It may look as if someone just drops over the side of a cliff, but what we’re really seeing is the end product of a process that’s been developing for a long time.

I’d like to trace the process of Peter’s failure so we might avoid falling into the same trap.

### **Peter Had Too Much Pride**

It began back in verse 27. After the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples headed for the Mt. of Olives. On the way, Jesus announced to them,

**“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” (Mark 14:27-28).**

But Peter wouldn’t hear of it, and he spoke up in protest. By the way, when Peter speaks up, he usually says something very profound or profoundly stupid. He has a tremendous facility for opening his mouth, inserting both feet, and wondering why he cannot walk. So Peter declares,

**“Even if all fall away, I will not” (v. 29).**

But Jesus wants him to know that not only will Peter disown him, he’ll do it very soon.

**“Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times” (v. 30).**

Peter still isn’t buying it, and he still isn’t finished. Emboldened by Peter’s confidence, they all agreed.

**But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same (v. 31).**

What was Peter’s problem? It wasn’t insincerity. Peter meant exactly what he said. I doubt he was ever more sincere than he was that night. As we’ll see shortly, he was willing to take on anyone to back up that claim. Peter’s problem wasn’t insincerity; his problem was pride. It was innocent enough. Peter was ignorant of what he was really made of and what it would take to follow Jesus. That is also our problem. Whenever we say, “Lord, that could never happen to me,” we’re about to step on a spiritual banana peel. We’re going to slip and fall.

Several years ago while I was in seminary I took a job as a high school football coach. I thought it was the perfect job for me to make a spiritual impact on the lives of the young men I coached. I had played football in both high school and college. I had made a significant impact for Christ on my college football team. I believed this was the perfect job and ministry for me; I was made for it. But I failed. I mishandled an incident with one of the boys on the team. The head coach was furious with me, and when the season ended I wasn’t asked back for another year of coaching.

That’s when I became a janitor! As I was scrubbing toilets I had a lot of time to think about what happened. And what happened is I approached that job and ministry with an attitude that said, “I can do this. I’ve got what it takes.” Whenever we approach a task for the Lord with that attitude, we’re headed for a fall. King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, said, *“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling”* (Prov. 16:18).

Years ago a young pastor sat in the office of a much older pastor named Ray Stedman. He confessed to Ray, “I think I need to get out of this ministry thing. I just don’t have what it takes. Nothing is going the way I want.” Ray looked at him and said, “You’re absolutely right! You **don’t** have what it takes. That’s why God can use you. So get back out there.”

Has the Spirit of God etched those six words of Jesus on the ledger of your heart: “Without me, you can do nothing”? Watch out for pride. Watch out for confidence in self. Watch out for an attitude that says, “Failure could never happen to me. I’ve got what it takes.”

### **Peter Had Too Little Prayer**

But that’s not all. Peter’s slow leak gets worse in verses 32-41. His first mistake is too much pride. His second mistake is too little prayer. And, yes, the two go together. Too much pride will always result in too little prayer. If I have what it takes, why pray? If I’m smart enough, or attractive enough, or qualified enough, or committed enough, why pray? Prayer is the recognition that I’m desperately in need; I’m helpless without him.

How do we see this mistake in Peter? Jesus brings his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. It’s kind of like an orchard of olive trees. The word Gethsemane means “oil press.” But that night, it isn’t olive oil that is being pressed, it’s Jesus. Listen to what happens.

**They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch” (verses 32-34).**

Then Jesus goes a bit further into the Garden and drops to his knees.

**Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Simon,” he said to Peter, “are you asleep? Couldn’t you keep watch for one hour?” (v. 37).**

In the Greek text, “Simon” is in the emphatic position and so this should be translated, “Simon, are you of all people asleep? You’re the last person in the world who should be asleep.” Interesting, isn’t it, that he calls him Simon, his old name? Simon is out like a light. Then Jesus adds this:

**“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (v. 38).**

This happens two more times. Two more times Jesus goes off and prays, and each time he comes back he finds Peter and his friends sawing logs.

What has happened to Peter’s resolve to be faithful to Jesus? He said, “Lord, I am willing to die with you.” But now he can’t even stay awake with him! This passage always cracks me up because from my vantage point up here on this stage, Jesus could say the same thing to a few of you while you listen to my sermons, “Couldn’t you stay awake for one hour?”!

Peter’s first mistake was pride, and this led to his second mistake, which was a failure stay alert in prayer. Jesus makes it very clear if you don’t stay alert in prayer you’ll succumb to temptation. That’s what Jesus is modeling for us. He’s staying alert in prayer. Jesus, the Son of God, the Creator of the universe, saw his desperate need for his Father’s strength. But not Peter. He doesn’t need to pray. He’s ready. Nothing can come between him and his Lord.

Remember that movie that came out a few years ago—*Titanic*? It showed quite clearly why the Titanic sunk. It really wasn’t an iceberg. It was the failure of the Captain to stay alert; to keep watch; to have an attitude something could happen at any time to bring even that great ship down. But he and the others in charge were so confident in their state-of-the-art ship that they failed to stay alert. That was Peter’s problem, and that is often our problem.

I find the one area in the Christian life most of us feel weak in prayer. I don't think I've ever met someone who said to me, "You know, I have an awesome prayer life." Why is that? We've all heard countless exhortations to pray. Jesus said, "Men ought always to pray and not faint." Paul said, "Pray without ceasing." James said, "You have not because you ask not." We all know this. I don't want to heap more guilt on you about your paltry prayer life, because mine isn't what it should be either. But I've come to believe that our failure in prayer isn't an accident. It's the result of not recognizing how weak and vulnerable we really are. It's like Jesus said, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is ready for the weekend."

Howard Hendricks said this: *"Satan doesn't mind if we witness for Jesus Christ, just so we don't pray. He knows it is far more important to talk to God about men than it is to talk to men about God. Satan doesn't mind if you study the Bible; just so you don't pray. Because then you'll develop a severe case of spiritual pride, and there's nothing worse than that. Satan doesn't mind serving in the local church, either; just so you don't pray. Because then nothing will ever happen of significance anyway, though you'll think that because you're active, you're really doing something worthwhile for the cause of Jesus Christ."*

Peter's tire is going flat. First, he has too much pride, and then he has too little prayer. But there's more.

### **Peter Acted in the Flesh**

Right there in the garden, Jesus says to his disciples,

**"The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" (verses 41b-42).**

As he's speaking, Judas approaches him followed by a throng of soldiers armed with swords and clubs. Judas greets Jesus with a kiss meant to identify him for the soldiers. As the soldiers reach for Jesus to place him under arrest, it says.

**Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear (v. 47).**

Who did that? Mark doesn't tell us, but the apostle John, who was also there that night, tells us in his gospel it's Peter who draws his sword. This is Peter's third mistake. His third mistake is acting in the flesh. Whenever you have too much pride, you're going to pray too little. If you say, "Lord, you can count on me," then you're not going to count on him. And if you don't count on him, you're invariably going to act in the flesh.

There's a lot of humor in the Scripture, and this is a great example. Here's Peter, unable to stay awake and keep watch, suddenly comes into partial consciousness and sees Roman soldiers seizing his Master. He thinks, "Okay, now's the time to go into action!" He whips out a sword.

I don't know where he got that sword or why he was even carrying it, but he has several problems. First, as I said, he's just woken up. I don't know about what you're like when you wake up, but I know I need a little time and a cup of coffee before I pull out a sword!

Not only that, it's clear Peter was angry. Coaches often tell their players, "If you can ever get your opponent angry, you have an advantage, because an angry person is never fully under control."

One more thing, Peter was a fisherman, and fishermen make poor swordsmen. Roman soldiers, on the other hand, were required by law to practice a minimum of an hour a day, taking out a sword, pivoting, and bringing the weapon over their heads so they could get full leverage coming down. The helmets were welded right down the middle, so if you could hit the welding with enough force and accuracy, you could split the helmet, disposing of your adversary.

There's no doubt that is what Peter is trying to do, but he's slightly off target. At this point, Jesus speaks up and says to the soldiers,

**"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled" (verses 48-49).**

In another gospel, Jesus rebukes Peter and says,

**"Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" (Mt. 26:52-54).**

Do you see his problem? It's the same one you and I face each day of the week. He's active when he should be passive. And he's passive when he should be active. When he should be passive in accepting the will of God, he's active with the sword. When he should be active in prayer, he's passive in sleep.

That's how it goes when we operate in the flesh. There are times to take action. Decisions have to be made and plans must be carried out. But there are times in life when we must wait. I regret how many times I've tried as a pastor to fix a problem in the flesh. I've shot off emails I regretted 30 seconds after I hit "send." Acting in the flesh never turns out well. I regret the times in my marriage when I've tried to confront an issue in the flesh. It never works. I just make a bigger mess. I regret those times when as a parent I've tried to muscle my kids into conformity to my will. That always backfires.

And sometimes, like Jesus, not acting in the flesh means we simply yield to what's happening to us; something unpleasant, something confusing, something wrong, but something that's somehow still in the Father's plan. Yesterday I helped bury a

friend of over 40 years who died after a long battle with cancer. Last Tuesday another old friend was killed in a car accident in Pleasanton. Things happen to us and those we love. Just as it was with Jesus, we're "handed over" to these things, like a sheep being led to slaughter. Have you ever considered the fact that Jesus fulfilled his mission not so much by what he did but by what he allowed others to do to him? He allowed himself to be handed over because he knew this was the Father's will. This was the only way sin could be atoned for and salvation for sinners like you and me could be accomplished.

### **Peter's Denial of Jesus**

And so, here's Peter: too much pride, too little prayer, trying to fix things in the flesh, and now primed to be nudged off the cliff by a mere servant girl in the courtyard of the high priest.

**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, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about" (verses 66-71).**

Who said that? The same man who said, "You can count on me." The same man who said, "My commitment is so great, I'm willing to die for you." This isn't a mistake; this is abject failure. While his Master stands tall before the high priest, Peter withers before a servant girl. He chokes when it's crunch time. And if you're sitting there saying, "That would never happen to me," you're already on the same road as Peter.

**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 (v. 72).**

It's a good thing Peter remembered, but he remembered too little and too late.

I'm wondering if there are any here today who have remembered, but remembered too little and too late? I wonder if there are any here who have heard the rooster crow? I wonder if there are any here who have wept bitter tears of broken promises and failure?

I hope you know this story doesn't end with bitter tears. The wonderful news about the biography of Simon Peter is it demonstrates that failure is not always fatal. Far from being the end, failure can be the raw material for a whole new way of living. And that's only because of what we'll celebrate next Sunday on Easter. Easter is what can turn our failure into our greatest reason for boasting. On Easter morning, the angel says something to some women who'd come to visit Jesus' tomb. They wanted to anoint his body according to custom. But instead of finding his body, they found an angel. Do you know what he said to them?

**"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" (Mark 16:6-7).**

Wait one minute. Did you catch those words: "But go, tell his disciples..." What did he say next? "and Peter."

I must tell you, I don't think the women at the tomb caught the significance of those words. And when they got back and told the disciples what the angel said, I don't think even the disciples understood the significance of those two words either. I think they went in one ear and right out the other. But I believe those two words sent shock waves down one man's spine, and that was Peter himself. I can just see Peter staring intently into the eyes of those women and saying, "Wait a minute! Did I hear you right? Did he really mention my name? Are you sure? He said, 'Peter'? He really said 'Peter.'"

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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