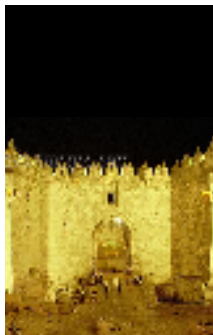


No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 16 - RECKONING

TEXT: MATTHEW 26:69 - 27:10 (ESV)



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Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

Friday Morning

Today we take a hiatus from the trial of Christ to fix our gaze on two other men who are reaping the whirlwind of their actions, oaths and weaknesses as this story unfolds. One of my favorite parts of Matthew's Gospel comes when he tells of his own conversion in the third person. There was a tax collector working his booth, and Jesus said, "You. Come follow me." (Mt 9:9) Matthew was that tax-collector. Jesus then went to his house for dinner. No one could believe Jesus would actually spend time with sinners like him—but it changed Matthew's life. Jesus hadn't come to call the healthy, but the sin-sick. (Mt 9:13)

In today's text Matthew fleshes out the stories of two other men—and like when we first found Matthew, we find two men in the process of catastrophic failure. As Jesus is being tried, mocked and beaten, their lives are unraveling. Matthew tells their stories one right after the other between Jesus' trial at the hands of the Sanhedrin and His trial before Pilate. Let's hear their stories to see what they might be saying to us today.

Matthew 26:69 - 27:10

⁶⁹Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." ⁷¹And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷²And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man."

⁷³After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." ⁷⁴Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. ⁷⁵And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

^{27:1}When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. ²And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

³Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, ⁴saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." ⁵And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. ⁶But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." ⁷So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers.

⁸Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, ¹⁰and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

Peter

"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. Never!" (Mt 26:35) There was no question about this in Peter's mind. Now as he stood in the courtyard behind Caiaphas' house, warming himself by the fire as Jesus faced trial, he must have felt a tinge of vindication. In the garden, he'd shown himself ready to fight and die. Then he followed, albeit at a distance, and now stood in the belly of the beast. At great personal risk, he made good on his oath. He was as close to Christ as he could get. Jesus was on trial for His life. Maybe the opportunity would come and he could defend his Lord. Maybe he'd be the difference maker.

There was a servant girl at the door to the courtyard who let Peter in. She recognized him. She didn't speak up right away, but eventually said, "You were with him?" (Mt 26:69) This would have intrigued everyone who heard it. Was this man really associated with the prisoner? Peter must have wanted to crawl inside himself as every eye began to search his face for familiarity. He could use no sword here. All he could do was answer or ignore the girl. And so it was that while Jesus stood trial before the priests, Peter's trial before the priests' servants began.

He tried to play it off, saying he didn't know what she meant. **That's one.** He moved from the fire to the entrance to the courtyard to get some distance. Another servant girl recognized him too. This time Peter took an oath—maybe swearing by God's name—that he "didn't know the man." **That's two.** By now, everyone was looking hard at Peter. And listening. He had a Galilean accent. A third time they pressed, only it's no longer so much a question as a statement—"You were with him!"

To this, Peter invokes a curse—maybe something like "May God strike me dead if I'm lying. I don't know the man." And all of the sudden, peeling through the early morning air, a rooster crows and Peter's mind is flooded by the memory of the words of his Lord and friend just hours earlier, "Before the rooster crows, Peter, you will deny me three times." **That was three.** Overcome, he weeps bitterly. So long as the focus wasn't on him, he was there, ready to step up. But at the comment of a servant girl, this rugged fisherman buckles and now he has to live with it.

Judas

The rooster signaled morning. It was now Good Friday. Judas had been monitoring the proceedings. Matthew says Judas was waiting for the verdict just like everyone else. When he heard Jesus was condemned to death, he changed his mind. What do we make of this? There were a range of sentences Jesus could have gotten. When Judas heard Jesus was condemned to die, this was either further than he meant for things to go, or it was dawning on him that he was about to be responsible for a man's death. Whichever, he changed his mind and he wanted out.

The money was now blood money used to aid a man's death, and could never again be used for sacred purposes. How could **he** keep it? It would have to go back to the priests. Holding out the cash, he explained that he had betrayed innocent blood. But they didn't want his blood money any more than he did. They refused to take it back, so in an act of desperation, he threw the money at them and ran away, as if he might outrun what he had done. But he could not. He ran and ran until he realized what he had done would follow him anywhere he went in this world, leaving him only one choice—to leave this world.

Judas hung himself. Luke writes in Acts that Judas bought a field and fell in it and his insides spilled out. Matthews says he hung himself. Which is it? The fulfilled prophecy tells us priests bought the field. The best I can piece it together is like this: Judas hung himself and no one took his body down. Eventually it either fell apart or the rope broke, and his body burst when it hit the ground. That field was purchased under his name and became a cemetery—a purchase suitable for unclean money.

You

This text tells of a reckoning for Peter and for Judas—and for us. Both accounts tell the tale of what any of us are capable of. Like Judas, some of us plan to discard Christ and the knowledge of Him, but others, like Peter, refuse to believe such infidelity resides in us. Peter and Judas are not the same. One clearly loves Jesus, the other clearly does not. But still, they both fail Christ—and the fail Him big. What are we to take from this?

First, Judas. James Boice observed “*partners in evil aren't friends.*” Judas and the Chief Priests were working together toward a common end, but they were never friends. When Judas tried to return the money, the implication is if he was wrong, so were they. “*What is that to us?*” was their reply. Sometimes we feel we must choose between the lesser of two evils. Never trust this dichotomy. Philosopher Iris Murdoch said, “*At the crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over.*”

Sometimes the only “good” choice is to confess the sins that brought you to this place and to repent. When Judas died, he died with a heart hardened by his disdain for Christ. He died without hope. Anyone can feel regret and want to turn away from their sin. But what marks true repentance is this: what do you **turn to** as you **turn from** your sin? Turning to anything other than God is not true repentance—just remorse or regret. Judas turned to his own despair and ended his life.

What about Peter? It's tempting to regard Peter as a weak, foolish man. But I think if we're to understand this account, we should start from the place of seeing Peter as more loyal, brave and invested in Christ than most of us have ever had the need or opportunity in life to test. Remember, the only reason Peter was in this position in the first place was because he (unlike any of the other disciples except probably John) had the courage to follow Jesus, and not to flee. And we owe him the benefit of the doubt that he followed out of love and some form of commitment to keep his word to Christ to never abandon him. His sword in the garden earns him at least this much from us.

Yet, here Matthew tells us that Peter fails, and big. Why? Well, if we look at his story, a couple contributing factors certainly jump off the page. First, when Jesus warned His disciples that they would all fall away, ^(Mt 26:31) Peter believed he was the exception. A friend of mine calls this the “*sin of exceptionalism*”—believing God's warnings (and His blessings too) don't apply to you as they do to others because your case is “*exceptional.*”

Not only did Peter believe he would be the exception, but he also seemed to look down on the other disciples. When he declared himself as the exception to Jesus' prediction, he said it this way—“*Even if all these other guys do, I won't.*” ^(Mt 26:33) This is the peril of conceit. Peter's exceptional view of himself led him to disbelieve Jesus' warnings **and** take a low view of His friends.

When we imagine ourselves to be stronger than God's word says we are, we put ourselves in a position where we're rejecting His counsel because we expect from ourselves something other than what His word says we should expect. When we do this, failure is catastrophic to our hearts because we have trusted in ourselves to show God that He should love us based on how we perform—and we've failed to perform.

And when you elevate your view of yourself as being the exception to the universal need for Christ's life, death and resurrection for sinners, you deny His saving work. Whenever you look at some besetting sin and say, “*I should have conquered this by now. God's patience must be wearing thin. His love must be emptying away,*” this is another way of saying His patience and love hinges on your ability to perform—which is another way of denying you need Him to rescue you from your sin.

We need to recognize another contributing factor to Peter's failure as well. Though Christ pleaded with him to pray, ^(Mt 26:41) Peter did not pray. Prayer is a meeting of hearts. In prayer we submit and commit our will to the will of God and ask for His intercession, strength and help. We acknowledge the “*Godness*” of God and the “*manness*” of man. In prayer, God tunes our hearts to sing His praise. Prayer is an act of yielding to the wisdom, will and work of God in our lives.

In Gethsemane, when Jesus told Peter to pray, Peter slept. But it isn't hard to imagine that if Peter thought himself exceptional, he didn't believe in his heart that the coming trials would break him. I don't know about Peter's reasons, but I ask you, have you ever neglected to pray because you honestly didn't feel like you needed God's help? Is there ever a time you don't need God's help? He says, “*Apart from me you can do nothing.*” ^(Jn 15:5) When you hear that, are you guilty of the sin of exceptionalism?

Why didn't Peter meet the same ruin as Judas? And what are we to do when we fail Christ in monumental ways? First, never believe you can't fail big. You can. You have. You will again. But know this—if your faith is in Christ, you are not on your own in your sin. You have an intercessor—someone praying for you.

A few hours earlier in the Upper Room, Jesus looked at Peter and said, “*Simon, Simon, look Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.*” ^(Lk 22:31-32) Every hero in Scripture fails except one—Christ. The reason Peter didn't fall away was because Jesus interceded for Him. Christ had a purpose for his life—that Peter would strengthen the church and become one of her primary architects after Jesus' ascension into heaven. So Peter did not fall away because he was being kept by Christ.

To be a Christian is to be one who is being kept by Christ. If it rests on you to make sure you don't lose your grip on Christ, you're in trouble. Can we hope He'll keep us the same as He kept Peter? By His word, **Yes!** Hebrews 7:25 says of Christ to believers, “*Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*” If you are a believer in Christ, you are **NOT** an exception to this rule. He saves you to the uttermost. He lives to intercede for you. This is the Gospel. “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.*” ^(Acts 16:31, Rom 10:9)