

Jesus' arrest and Peter's denial

Who has not experienced failure?

How do you deal with failure? Are you devastated, consumed with guilt and the sense that your life will carry a negative burden and the future will never be better? Do you blame failure on circumstances or someone else? Or, do you find a way to make amends, to learn new behavior, to take responsibility and fashion positive values?



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All four gospels show Jesus living out the love and grace of God in an environment of flawed religious and philosophical ideas, political violence, economic injustice and racial conflict. The old-fashioned word *sin* expresses the core of humanity's desperate need for God. The narrative of Jesus' betrayal plainly reveals that God has chosen to enter our world and offer forgiveness and a new life to anyone who will turn to God.

The Passover meal is concluded when Jesus takes his disciples outside an overcrowded Jerusalem to pray on the Mt. of Olives. The area is just east of the city and was used as a campground for many of the pilgrims who had traveled far for Passover. It lay along the route from Jerusalem to the village of Bethany, where Jesus often stayed with Mary, Martha and Lazarus when he visited Jerusalem (Luke 10:38). On that night of his betrayal Jesus prayed, in the quiet of an olive orchard, that God would remove the cup of suffering and death (Luke 22:40-45). Instead of keeping the prayer vigil, the disciples fell asleep. Jesus rebuked them and warned of the tragic events to come.

The main celebration was over and the city and surrounding area was now very quiet when an entourage of Temple officials and armed guards were led by Judas to arrest Jesus. Consider the irony that they have just celebrated the amazing event of God saving his people from bondage in Egypt long ago and now the Jewish leaders have come to destroy the Messiah who would free them from the bondage of sin and give them the freedom of grace.

Judas identified Jesus to his enemies with a simple kiss, a common greeting in that culture. But this kiss did not symbolize friendship, trust or respect.

One would think the disciples had forgotten everything Jesus taught over the past three years, everything he had said at the Passover meal, as they sought to use weapons against the arresting forces. What about the idea of loving an enemy, turning the other cheek? (Luke 6:27-33). One of the disciples acted immediately, cutting off the ear of one of the high priest's slaves (Luke 22:50). Jesus immediately stopped the violence and healed the slave.

Jesus confronted this gang of nocturnal conspirators. They were treating him like a dangerous criminal, but they had numerous opportunities to arrest him during the past week when he openly taught in the Temple courts (Luke 22:52-53). It was a simple matter of Jesus' popularity among the people and the Jewish authorities' fear that this could result in a riot and a harsh military reaction by the Roman military. They knew how to use their power and manage the skittish Roman authorities to their advantage. Jesus was taken to the palace of the high priest near the Temple until a trial could be held the next morning.

We began this lesson talking about failure. The disciples failed to watch and pray in the garden. Judas failed to love and trust Jesus, betraying him for 30 silver coins. The disciples failed to hear what Jesus had clearly told them would happen. Now Peter, one of the most vocal disciples, will do the unthinkable. Peter follows them to the high priest's palace, quietly fitting in with the mixed crowd of Temple guards and servants. A female servant and a couple of other men recognize Peter as one of Jesus' followers, a "Galilean" (Luke 22:56-59). Peter's third denial of Jesus was followed by the crowing of a rooster. Earlier, before the arrest, when Peter had vowed he would never deny Jesus, the Lord had told Peter he would deny three times before a rooster crowed (Luke 22:31-34). With the crowing of the rooster and Jesus looking at Peter, the shamed disciple slipped away into the night weeping (Luke 22:62). Since you already know this story, you know the ending — the power of God's grace to mend a broken heart, turn a life around and turn tragedy into joy.

There was still hope for Peter. A significant part of Jesus' grief as he prayed in the garden was both the knowledge his disciples would fail and the horror of

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his death on the cross. But Jesus knew the weakness of the human heart and the power of his death and resurrection to give us God's forgiveness. Peter's failure in the courtyard that night would be followed by his visit to the empty tomb (Luke 24:12), his witness of the risen Christ (Luke 24:34), his powerful preaching at Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14-36) and his teaching and healing in the Temple courts as Jesus had done (Acts 3:1-26).

We can identify with Peter as we face the challenges of life and sometimes choose to remain silent when our words could help someone, when we fail to live with integrity or stand up for what is right. Our testimony is not one of spiritual or moral superiority but the power of God's love and forgiveness to help us be better people. The image often promoted today echoes the words and actions of Jesus' disciples in the garden: to fight, to confront those we see as enemies, to use the tactics of the unbelieving world. Much of the public rhetoric I hear these days from some claiming to follow Jesus is tinged with pride, a claim of superior knowledge and authority, and disdain for anyone who disagrees.

We will find greater peace and strength in our dedication to Christ who chose the cross. We will make a greater impact on our world when we spend time in prayer, asking God to empower us to minister to others, love the unlovely and forgive us for our failures and mistakes.

The story of Peter's denial of Jesus consistently reminds me how much God loves us. In the predawn darkness of the high priest's courtyard, overwhelmed with anger and fear, confused by the idea of the cross, Peter did a terrible thing when he betrayed his Savior. But the crowing of the rooster signaled the coming of dawn, not the kind of day Peter wanted but a new day unlike any other. For, by the power of God, contrary to human expectations, salvation was about to become reality through Jesus. Thank God!

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