Jesus, Peter and the Power of Darkness
Luke 22: 31-34; 47-62.

So it's night time, and Jesus has finished His Last Supper with the disciples. He has warned them that trouble lies ahead, and out on the Mount of Olives, in the Garden of Gethsemene, they have slept as Jesus has prayed. And as He finishes praying, a group of priests and soldiers and elders of the people – representatives of the religious, military and political leadership come in the night to arrest Him, lead Him away to be tried.

But before Luke tells us about the trial, he tells us something else first. And that is the failure of Peter. Now in case you don't know, Peter goes on to become the chief leader of the early church. Which begs the question, why does Luke – in fact why do all the gospel writers – provide us with such a ring-side seat on Peter's darkest moment? Why, when others are so protective of their religious leaders, as we've seen this last week in the Middle East, did the early church put Peter's dirty laundry on such public display?

Well, Luke told us from the outset that he was going to give us an unadulterated account of what really happened: Luke 1:1-4, 'Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.' In other words, Luke's a historian, and a truthful one, and this happened, so he feels duty bound to report it.

And yet, it's pretty cleat that Luke doesn't tell us *everything* Jesus and the disciples got up to, some stuff gets left out, so why does *this* story make the cut? Why not leave it on the cutting room floor?

Well, as I said last week, both Luke and Peter know that the real story, the big story is not about them. It's not about making Peter or any of the others look good, it's about Jesus, and so they don't hesitate to tell the truth about themselves – however unflattering that is, so that you'll believe the truth about Jesus.

But there's another reason as well, and that is that this story about Peter and his fall and his restoration, because he does get wonderfully restored by Jesus – this story shines a bright spotlight on God's redeeming, transforming grace. And it tells us that with Jesus, even a failure like Peter can have a future.

And that should give everyone of us hope. Because if you don't know this already, we are all Peter. All of us, have either been in his shoes, or are in his shoes now or have the potential to be in his shoes. And it's for that reason that this story - not a story of a man winning a stunning victory of faith, but the account of a man falling flat on his face - is like a beacon in the dark night of personal failure.

Now, if we're going to learn from Peter I think we have to ask ourselves three questions: why does Peter fall? Why does he turn back after his fall? And why does Jesus allow it to happen in the first place?

Why does Peter fall?
I think there are three reasons:

Firstly, Peter has an enemy. The meal ends and Jesus says in v31: "Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat."

Satan's already entered Judas and incited him to betray Jesus. But he's not satisified with taking the one disciple out, he wants Peter as well. But it's not just Peter he wants either. You see, when Jesus says, 'satan demanded to have you' that '*you'* is plural. It's not just Judas and it's not just Peter, it's all of the disciples, he has demanded all of you. Like some monster with an unquenchable appetite for flesh, satan wants these disciples.

So whilst Peter is number one on the list, the truth is that any one who chooses to follow Jesus will find themselves a target. Years later, Peter could write from experience in 1 Peter 5:8, 'your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.' Peter had experienced what it was to be hunted. He had experienced what it was to have the forces of darkness want to sift him like wheat, to beat him to chaff. And so he tells us – hey learn this much from me – be on your guard. You have an enemy who seeks to devour you.

And yet you're not at his mercy. Did you notice how Jesus puts it? V31 again, 'Simon, behold, Satan *demanded* to have you.' Does the enemy want Peter? Sure he does. Do the forces of darkness want to take out the other disciples? Of course they do. But satan has to ask permission first. And he can do all the demanding he wants – but it is our heavenly Father who is in absolute sovereign control. And we may face an enemy who is like a lion, but he is a lion on a leash. And just as with Job in the Old Testament, satan must first ask permission of God before he can lay a finger on one of God's children. And that means that Peter and the disciples and you and I will only ever face what our loving heavenly father allows us to face. And we'll see why he might allow it later.

The second reason Peter falls is that he is confident in himself. Jesus warns Peter that he has an enemy and that enemy is after him, and that should have made Peter sit up and take notice. Instead Peter responds by saying, 'hey that could never happen to me': v33, Peter said to [Jesus], "Lord I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." Peter's name means 'rock', and he thinks he really is a rock: rock solid and dependable. And failing to appreciate both his own weakness and the darkness of the hour, he puts his confidence in himself.

But it was worse even that that. You see the other Gospels record Peter as saying, "Though *they all* fall away because of you, I will never fall away" (Matt 26:33). So not only was he confident in himself, he thought he was better than the others as well. Everyone else might fall flat on their faces, everyone else might run from trouble, but I'm made of different stuff Jesus. So, this wasn't just self-confidence, this was *proud* self-confidence.

And so as we saw last week, when they came to the garden and Jesus tells the disciples to pray that they don't fall into temptation, Peter doesn't pray. He

sleeps. And just maybe, that was in part because he didn't feel the need to pray. After all – he was Peter wasn't he? He was sufficient in himself. It didn't dawn on him just how much he needed God.

But just as Jesus was warning them a second time to wake up and pray, the arrest party arrived, led by Judas. And in the dark of the night Judas goes to betray Jesus with a kiss. Verse 49, 'when those who were around him saw what would follow, they said, "Lord, shall we strike with the sword?"

But no one waits for an answer – or at least *Peter* doesn't wait for an answer. Listen to what John writes about this moment, John 18:10, 'then *Simon Peter*, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear.'

So it's Peter who tries to fight their way out of trouble. Now, we can argue about how on earth did he manage to take an ear off, and fat lot of good that is anyway. But given what happens later, don't you think it's interesting that it is easier to show a bit of short-lived zeal, a bit of macho muscle, than it is to really suffer for Jesus and be publically exposed for Jesus? Peter thinks he can win this battle on his own, or at least go down fighting, but as someone else has said – it's a whole lot easier to take up a sword than it is to daily take up your cross and follow Jesus, with all the disgrace and public shame that might entail.

But Jesus isn't looking for a fight. V51, 'Jesus said, "no more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him.' You see, whilst Peter's confidence lay in himself, Jesus' security, Jesus' inner confidence lay in God His Father's sovereignty, and He had zero intention of trying to fight His way out of His Father's will. So, instead of ordering His disciples to fight, Jesus picks up this severed ear and puts it back in place.

Just think about that. Here is a man who has come out to arrest Jesus; who has come to take Jesus to His death and Jesus heals his ear! Don't you think that's incredible? Peter wants to kill him and Jesus wants to heal him. And it's the last healing miracle in Luke's gospel, and it's done on the night of His betrayal as He is led away to be tried and executed and it's done to an enemy. What a picture of God's grace to people like us who don't deserve it. Jesus hasn't come to do you or me or anyone else harm – He's come to heal and to put things right – even for His enemies.

And just in case anyone wanted to arrest Peter later for grevious bodily harm, He also disposes of the evidence: and that is really cool!

So, the second reason Peter falls is that his confidence is in himself. And that's a trap we can all fall into. It's why the apostle Paul warns us in 1 Cor 10:12, 'Let anyone who thinks that he stands - [let anyone who thinks it will never happen to them, let anyone who thinks that they are more than up for the fight] – take heed lest he fall.' You see, we are all vulnerable to failure, we are all vulnerable to attack, we are all vulnerable to making stupid decisions and choosing sin over righteousness, and perhaps never more so than when we think we aren't

vulnerable, when, like Peter, our confidence is misplaced – in our ourselves. Because short-lived zeal is easy, isn't it? But long lasting faithfulness to Jesus is another matter all together.

Well, as the crowd arrests Jesus He tells them, v53, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness." And they lead Him away to the High Priest's house.

Peter falls because he has a dark enemy and because he had misplaced confidence in himself.

But the third reason he fell was that he gave way to fear, not faith.
As they take Jesus away, Peter follows them, at a safe distance, into the courtyard of the High Priest's house. Verse 55, 'And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them.' So, it's the middle of the night and it's April and it's cold, and they light a fire in the courtyard. But ask yourself, who are the 'they' who kindle the fire? Who is this group of people who Peter is having to sit among? It's the same group who have just arrested Jesus, and here is Peter, sitting in the middle of them, and they are hostile.

So, if we think of Peter as some sort of coward, as some sort of yellow chicken, we're deluding ourselves – it's taken courage to go this far. But as the night wears on that courage begins to fail him. And it is the middle of the night, and Peter is emotionally drained, and he's tired and maybe now he's cold as well, and as we saw last week, satan doesn't wait to sift you like wheat until the time is convenient. He comes when you're vulnerable. And it is the hour and the power of darkness, and Peter who had been so confident and so happy to pledge his loyalty to Jesus in private, is now going to be tested in public.

V56, 'Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him."' Now just picture the scene. She's a servant *girl*. She's just a young thing, and he's a big fisherman. And she's not a high priest and she's not a soldier, she's a girl, and no one has mentioned anything at any time about bringing any charges against the disciples, and yet Peter says, v57, "Woman, I do not know him." Denial number one.

Then someone says, v58, "You also are one of them." Come on, we know you're one of the disciples. And Peter denies it: "man, I am not." Denial number two. He has denied he knows Jesus, and now he denies he has anything to do with his followers.

But Peter is still there. He still wants to be near Jesus. He could have run away, but he's hanging in there, but it is by a thread.

Then comes the third charge, v59, '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." O come on, your accent gives you away, you're a northerner – what else would a northerner be doing in the courtyard of the high priest in the middle of the night if it wasn't because of that other northerner, Jesus?'

So here is Peter, in the middle of this hostile group, and putting Luke together with the other gospel accounts it seems clear that one starts and another joins in, and they're piling on the pressure and they're coming at him from every angle, and Peter just crumbles. V60, But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And Matthew and Mark tell us he backed that up with a string of swear words. Denial number three.

The man who pledged he'd go to prison for Jesus, even die for Jesus, denies he even knows Jesus. The man of rock has been crushed to pieces. Why? Because he's scared. He's fearful. He denies Jesus for the same reason you and I might be tempted to keep quiet in a hostile environment, when the pressure is piling on and there's a cost of admitting to being a follower of Jesus, and it looks like people might mock you or insult you, or your so-called friends turn on you. And Jesus can face it all calmly because He entrusts His life into His Father's hands. But Peter, and so often you and I take our eyes off of those hands, and think our lives are in others' hands, and as a result give way to fear.

Peter didn't want to be exposed as a follower of Jesus, He didn't want to stand out, because of the fear of what might happen. He tried to stay close to Jesus whilst staying incognito, because he feared the consequences. He believed in this crowd's ability to harm him, more than in God's ability to care for him, whatever the circumstance. He gave way to fear, rather than faith.

And don't you know what that feels like! The fear of exposure, of standing out, of being excluded or thought of as odd. As Peter discovered, it's easy to be bold and brave among friends, among fellow Christians – not so easy when the classroom, or the workplace, or the home is hostile. And one denial followed another, because sadly, it becomes easier to stay quiet about Jesus, or to deny Him by our words or our lives, each time we do it.

So why does Peter fail? – because he had an enemy, because he was confident in himself, and when the pressure was on he gave way to fear, rather than faith.

And none of that took Jesus by surprise: V34, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me." Jesus knows Peter better than Peter knows himself, and the same is true for you and me. And when we fail, we can be horrified, and think 'how could that ever have happened?' And Jesus says, 'I know how it could happen. I know that you are dust. And just as with Peter, I called you and chose you, knowing it would happen.' You see, Jesus doesn't watch Peter or you or me fall into sin and say, 'man, if only I knew that was going to happen I'd never have chosen him, drop him quick.' Now, He knows it all ahead of time. And whether you are looking back on failure, or whether you're experiencing it now, you can do so in the certainty that Jesus knows all about it, and still chose you to know and experience His grace and forgiveness. And He doesn't leave you there. There is hope for failures.

Why does Peter turn back?

Peter does turn back, and is wonderfully restored, and if you don't know it you can read about it in John 21. But why does he turn back? Why, instead of wandering off into the night and never being seen again, or killing himself as Judas did, does Peter turn back and put himself in a position where he can be restored?

Firstly, because he has a Saviour who prays for him. I had lunch this week with a friend and as we finished up, he said to me, 'Martin, what can I pray for, for you?' And you don't know what that did for me – you want to pray for me? *You* want to pray for *me*? Well, wonderful as it is to have friends praying for you, and believe me it is – how much more wonderful that we have a Saviour who prays for us. V31-2, "Simon, Satan demanded to have you… but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." The reason Peter turned back after denying Jesus is that Jesus was praying for Peter. He's not alone, Jesus is in the battle with him. And Jesus' prayers are stronger than satan's demands, and that is true, not just for Peter, it's true for all of us. In Hebrews 7:25 the writer says that Jesus 'is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.' Your faith will stand, you will cross the finish line, you can come back from failure and stand again having fallen, because Jesus is praying for you.

The second reason Peter turns back from failure is because Jesus looks at him. Because that's the moment, isn't it, when Peter comes face to face with what he is really like and what he has just done? V60-2, 'The rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord… And he went out and wept bitterly.' Now what must that look from Jesus to Peter have conveyed. Because it wasn't 'you've failed, you've let me down, you've denied me, I told you you would, and I never want to see you again', was it? For that look to have broken Peter's heart and been the thing that starts him on his journey back, it must have been a look of love and mercy and pity that pierced Peter to the heart. And here is Jesus, surrounded by His enemies, on trial for his life – and He turns and looks with love at Peter.

Jesus doesn't wait for you to clean up your act before He loves you. Paul says that 'God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). And when you are in the middle of failure and your world is caving in around you, and you are on your face, you can know that Christ looks upon you with love and that He died for you knowing everything about you, and that will give you what you need to stand back up on your feet and face life.

But the third reason Peter turns back is that he does turn back. And that's not circular reasoning. Peter repents. You see, Judas regretted what he had done, and goes off and hangs himself, but there is a difference between regret and repentance. There is a difference between being sorry that you've been found out, or sorry you have to face the consequences of your sin, or sorry for the shame you face, there is a difference between all those and real heart-breaking sorrow for your sin. A godly sorrow that leads to repentance. A sorrow that acknowledges you're the problem and you need to turn back to Jesus for grace

and mercy. And that was why Peter was weeping – he had come face to face with himself, and knew he needed mercy and forgiveness and that is why he turned back.

Now, as we finish I just want to ask…

Why does Jesus allow it to happen?
I mean, why does Jesus allow Peter to fall in the first place? If Jesus' prayers are stronger than satan's demands, and if Jesus can pray to ensure that Peter turns back – why does Jesus allow him to fall and to fail at all? Why does He allow us to go through stuff like failure if He could pray and it wouldn't happen?

Well, look what Jesus says to Peter in v32, "And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Jesus allows Peter to fail, so that when he turns back he can strengthen the church. Not with Peter's bullish, self-confident, macho, 'I'm going to take the fight to them' type of leadership, but the leadership of a man who has been humbled and broken and come face to face with what he is really like; a man who understands God's restoring grace – who knows he is a sinner in need of grace, not a self-congratulating Pharisee.

You see when you face personal failure, you can either defend yourself, or run away and hide, --- *or* you can learn and grow from it and allow God to use you to help others. And that's what happened with Peter. And when we come to Acts – Luke's second volume - we see Peter, a man humbled and restored, filled with the power of God's Spirit, confident not in himself but in the risen power of Jesus, strengthening the church.

You see, the powers of darkness might want to crush Peter, but Jesus had better plans for him, just as He does for you, and he will even use your failures, transformed by His grace, to get you there.