

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Peter

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

One of my past students was a young man who became a Christian in his first year at high school. In his last year he was made school captain. Somehow he spent less and less time with his Christian friends. He took up with the in-crowd that was into heavy drinking, and appeared to give up his faith.

I came across him a couple of years later and took the opportunity to ask him what had gone wrong. He said he'd made some mistakes, done some bad things, and then was too ashamed to ask God for forgiveness all over again. He thought it was better just to leave it. It was all too hard, and he'd made too much of a mess of it.

Have you ever felt like that? I certainly did as a teenager. We turn to Christ. It's great we've been forgiven. We really want to live for him. And then we do something we shouldn't have done, and it's tempting just to give up. The enemy of our souls has always used failure to grind away at faith. But God isn't fazed by our failures, and he doesn't give up on us.

I

Peter sank down onto the cold stones of the little alleyway. At least here, away from the torches of passers-by, he was safe from curious looks. He was still sobbing - racking sobs that shook his body. Finally he heaved himself into a sitting position. He leant back against the wall that ran along the side of the High Priest's house, oblivious of the cold, numbed by the bitterness of self-loathing for what he'd just done. He tried to blot out the image of Jesus' face, swollen and caked with blood, but still the face Peter knew so well.

In all the time he'd spent with Jesus he'd loved watching his face - that look of tenderness as he touched a leper, or talked to people other wouldn't be seen with. The expression of authority when he was telling people about God - his Father, he called him. The look of firmness when the religious leaders surrounded him, and attacked him with questions designed to trap him. His eyes lighting up with his smile - and he'd often smiled when he looked at Peter. But not tonight. Tonight his eyes had been sombre, dark with pain.

Peter had probably been closer to Jesus than anyone else, except John and John's brother James. How could he of all people have done what he'd just done?

Was it really only a few hours ago at their Passover meal that he'd said he was ready to go to prison with Jesus, even to die with him? He'd said so many things, as usual. As they'd made their way through the city gate, across the river and up the hill to the olive grove, Jesus had warned them they would all fall away. Peter had been shocked. "The others might, but I won't," he said. And he had followed Jesus - even through all the confusion after Jesus had been arrested.

Admittedly he'd followed him at a distance, but still he'd got right inside the High Priest's courtyard - with a bit of help from John, who was known there. But then John had disappeared, and that mere slip of a

servant-girl had kept on staring at him every time she went past. Finally she'd come boldly up to him, looked him in the eye, and announced triumphantly to all within earshot, "This man was with him!"

It was true - Peter had been with Jesus - with him day in and day out for three years, from one end of the country to the other. But when a mere girl had cast an accusing look at him, he'd blurted out, "I don't even know that man!"

A bit later she'd pointed him out again to the others gathered around the fire. She had everyone eyeing him suspiciously. Somebody made a remark about his Galilean accent. That got him really frightened. He began to curse. He swore again - and again - that he didn't know Jesus. And then the moment Peter would never forget, however long he lived - Jesus in the firelight, surrounded by his enemies, turning his head to look directly at his friend Peter.

II

The cold light of dawn began to creep into the dark alleyway, but the new day brought no hope to Peter - the future all bleak; the present pure misery, and memories of the past only adding to the pain.

How well he remembered that time by the lake - the first time he'd realized Jesus was more than human, that he was somehow like God in what he knew and could do. Peter had been hard at work, along with Andrew and James and John, washing the nets after the night's fishing. As they worked they were listening to Jesus. He was sitting on the lakeshore, talking to the people around about God. A crowd began to gather and grew, pushing forward until Jesus was in the water. So he climbed into Peter and Andrew's boat. He asked Peter to cast anchor a little way from the shore. Then he sat in the boat, and kept on teaching.

When he finished he told Peter to go out where it was deeper, and let down the nets. But they'd just finished cleaning the nets. Besides, Peter knew better than anybody there were no fish - they'd been out all night and caught nothing. But maybe it was the look on Jesus' face. It wasn't easy, even for Peter, to argue with him.

It must have been the biggest catch they'd ever had. It strained the nets to breaking-point, and they had to call James and John to come and help them. Even then, both boats were so weighed down they were taking in water. And Peter knew he was in the presence of someone greater than he could have imagined. He knelt down, right then and there - and begged Jesus to leave him. He knew he wasn't worthy to be anywhere near him.

He'd been quite right about that. But somewhere along the line he'd forgotten. He'd become rather pleased with himself, proud of his position as the unofficial spokesman for the twelve of them Jesus had chosen to be with him. There was that time when Jesus had asked them who they all thought he was. Peter had blurted out the almost unthinkable: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus said he could only know that because God had shown him. Peter was chuffed to think God was showing him things he wasn't showing the others. But the pride that welled up quickly led to downfall. Jesus had gone on to tell them that he had to go to Jerusalem. There he'd be handed over to the pagan authorities, be killed and then raised to life. In the heat of the moment Peter had blurted out, "That will never happen to you!"

Jesus had looked at him, and then said, "Get behind me, Satan. You're a stumbling-block in my way." Peter had been shocked and thoroughly shamed. It was true. Satan had been trying all along to stop Jesus doing what God had sent him to do, and Peter was doing the same thing. What had possessed him to dare to contradict Jesus - to think he knew better than Jesus?

Yet even at that low point, he couldn't have imagined calling Jesus 'that man' and repeatedly swearing he didn't know him.

Jesus was about to die, and Peter wished he could too.

III

Peter had failed miserably to be the person he wanted to be, and was meant to be - someone who loved God with heart and mind and loved his neighbour. He'd failed to love Jesus. He'd denied he even knew him. Fear for his own safety had overruled any desire to speak the truth and trust God to see him through the consequences.

But he wasn't to wallow in misery for long. On just the third day after Jesus died, Peter was actually standing in the tomb in which Jesus' body had been sealed. The stone blocking the entrance had been rolled away, breaking the seal, and the tomb was empty. Then on the evening of that same day, as Jesus' friends tried to take in what had happened, Jesus himself appeared to dispel every doubt and fear, and Peter's misery turned to joy. Nevertheless the memory of that night in the High Priest's courtyard - of Jesus turning to look at him - continued to haunt Peter.

A week later a group of them set off for Galilee, as Jesus had told them to. They went back to their old occupation. One night they fished till dawn, but caught nothing. At first light someone standing on the shore called out to them to put the net down on the right side of the boat. They did, and the net filled with fish, more than they could handle. Suddenly the memory of that day on the lakeshore came flooding back to Peter. Impulsively he grabbed his coat, wrapped it round himself, and swam to meet Jesus.

There was a fire going on the beach. Jesus had fish already cooking, and a supply of bread. They all ate together, and then Jesus said to Peter, using the name he'd first known him by, "Simon, do you really love me, more than any of the others do?" Peter could only reply, "Lord, you know I love you." "Then feed my lambs," said Jesus.

Three times Jesus asked that question. The third time Peter felt hurt at being asked yet again, but the old desire to defend and promote himself was gone. All he could say was, "Lord, you know everything. You know I love you." "Then feed my sheep," said Jesus.

So Jesus graciously lifted Peter out of the pit of constant self-accusation. Peter knew beyond doubt that he'd been forgiven, and restored to the full status of a believer in Jesus, with its privileges and responsibilities.

With God, failure is never final. And as we trust him to forgive us, so he entrusts us with the task of helping others understand the greatness of his mercy.

By God's mercy, my past student's failure to follow Christ wasn't final. He eventually went to Bible College and is now serving as a pastor. For him the words Peter wrote to struggling Christians are certainly true:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials, these have come so that your faith may be proved genuine.