

The faith of Peter

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[0:00] There's probably not anyone in the Bible who personifies the ups and downs of following Jesus and the! Right? One minute he's making amazing confessions of faith, the next minute he's falling on his face. And he's the disciple you probably know the most about. He's really a study in contrast. He's cowardly. He's brave. He's impulsive. He's thoughtful.

And I think we all connect with Peter on some level, right? And that's why we hear reading like this mornings and we think, oh gosh, get behind me, Satan. This is not one of these comforting gospel stories about really going to feed a little bit of blessing children.

This is Jesus overcoming Satan. And he's equipping us to do the same in his disciples. He's outlining the path of discipleship, of following Jesus.

If I need to jump, if I need to jump on the appellate. Okay. So the sequencing is pretty clear here. Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow him. What does that mean? That's what we're going to look at this morning. But first let's talk a little bit about the first few verses and this interaction that Jesus has with his disciples and with Peter.

[1:22] So first of all, why did Jesus start telling his disciples about what he was going to suffer in verses 21 through 23, if you're following along in the Bible? Let's just recap a little bit.

Matthew's been dealing with this theme of unbelief and rejection for several chapters now. And most of this chapter details more rejection from the religious leaders who just clearly didn't understand him, who were seeking for ways to trap him.

And there's also some back and forth with his disciples who are maybe getting 50% like when they're doing well. So after all of not admitting it, in the reading we had last week, Jesus says to the disciples, Who do you say that I am?

And Peter, speaking on behalf of the group, makes this powerful confession in verse 16. He says, You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And when you're reading this, you almost want to stand up and cheer like, Yes! Way to go, Peter!

Finally someone's getting it! So after this confession, Jesus starts to invite the disciples deeper. He starts to explicitly draw out the battle plan for his cosmic mission.

[2:33] That he'll suffer. That he'll be put to death. And that he'll be raised. And this time, Peter's response is the complete opposite of what you would hope for. And it's not just, Go, Barney doesn't quite get it.

It's, he doesn't get it. And because he doesn't get it, he's actually cooperating with Satan to afford Jesus' mission. A few verses before, Jesus had called Peter the rock on which he builds the church. But now the rock is a stumbling stone. So let's zoom out for a minute and talk about a few implications from these first verses for us. These verses show us that we can respond in fear or we can respond in trust.

So Peter's response seems reasonable at first glance. He loves Jesus. He doesn't want to see anything bad happen to him. It's kind of like if you're talking with a friend and they're sharing something they're afraid of or something that's really hard.

And you're kind of, you're trying to reassure them. You're like, oh, I'll be here with you. I won't let that happen to you. It's not going to be that bad. Don't worry. But in this culture, for a student to do that with a battle plan was a huge overstepping of boundaries.

[3:46] It was really inappropriate. It was really garrison. And this statement, never lord, umeg in Greek, suggests that Peter himself was going to try to stop Peter or try to stop Jesus.

And we don't know exactly what was going on in Peter's mind. He might have been afraid. He might have been prideful because Jesus had just blessed him or a few verses earlier.

It was probably a condemnation. But what he's not doing, he's not taking Jesus aside and asking for clarification. He's not curious.

He's not asking questions. He's not saying, Jesus, I'm afraid. How can this be true? Can you help me understand? He's not thinking, I must be missing something.

If Jesus is telling me this, and I trust him, then I'm not understanding. He's assuming there's something wrong with Jesus and what Jesus is saying. And I think we have to consider this for ourselves.

[4:46] How often do we do this? We shut down something that the Lord might want to do in and through us. Because we just think, surely not. And I want us to consider if there are places in our lives where Jesus is inviting us into a deeper understanding of his mission.

And how he might want us to be a part of it. People we're walking with our community. How will he respond? Let's contrast Peter's response, never born, with Mary's.

When Angel Gabriel announces that she will bear the Messiah. She asks a clarifying question. How can this be, since I'm a virgin? But even though she's troubled, she says, may it be to me according to your word.

It's a totally different posture. It's a humble posture. It's a trusting posture. And church, I hope that that is our posture. When Jesus asks us to do something for him.

I hope we seek to live with that kind of trust. May it be to me according to your word. No matter how hard the call. How challenging the situation. And secondly, the scene with Peter and the disciples shows the humanity of Jesus.

[6:04] The loneliness of his call. We tend to think that everything was a teaching moment with Jesus. And that's not entirely wrong. He did model and teach all the time.

But I think sometimes we miss Jesus' humanity. He was definitely trying to invite these disciples into a deeper understanding of what was going on. He was telling them what was about to happen in Jerusalem.

Absolutely. But could Jesus' choice to reveal this not also be a human need for companionship and the burden he was carrying? Have you ever been in a place where you're really, really suffering? And you may believe to be vulnerable to someone you think you can trust. You're not even asking them to do anything. You just don't want to carry this thing alone. You pour your heart out to them. But instead of listening, this well-being person, you know, they don't ask questions. They don't listen. Maybe they dismiss what you're saying. Or they respond in a way that makes you realize they don't understand the situation at all.

[7:06] And then you think, gosh, I wish I hadn't said anything. Because now I'm dealing with this betrayal, this hurt by a friend that doesn't get it. And I still have this painful situation.

Jesus gets this, friends. The burden that Jesus carried was when dealing with the cosmic powers of the universe. But he understands our loneliness and our pain. So this cosmic powers of the universe, this brings us to our next point.

What shows that we can have in mind the things of God or the things of man. But we can't do both. So we hear this rebuke.

We get behind me saying, we hear it as very, very harsh. But be clear that the rebuke is issued to Satan and not to Peter.

Jesus is making a clear distinction between the two. And he responds with an incredible weightiness and seriousness that's equal to the importance of his mission.

[8:06] The fate of humanity is literally hanging in the balance. Jesus is single-minded. He's not messing around. He is moving forward. And he will not be thwarted. And so that's why he responds this way.

Commentator A.B. Bruce writes, Jesus recognizes here his own enemy, meaning Satan, in a new and even more dangerous form.

For none are more formidable instruments of temptation than well-meaning friends who care more for our comfort than for our character. Y'all, can we seek to operate as those who care about the things of God, who see with his eyes, who care about character, rather than the things of man, or worldly comfort?

So Jesus could have left it there, right? He could have just rebuked Peter and seen on to the next thing. He could have told Peter to leave. He could have given up on the whole group.

But instead, Jesus invites them into something deeper. He shows them what it really means to follow them. He shows them, again, what it means to have in mind the things of God.

[9:23] He shows them the path of discipleship. And what is a disciple? A disciple is a committed follower and learner. And in Jesus' culture, typically being a disciple meant that you have been chosen, that you are elite.

It was often people that were wealthy. They were really learned. And often disciples lived with their teachers. And we see that with the disciples, right? They're traveling around with Jesus.

Because the goal is that you're emulating everything about their way of life. But the difference here with Jesus is that he's not offering discipleship to just an elite few.

He uses the word whoever. Being a disciple is open to anyone who chooses to come. And there are three conditions for discipleship in it.

Denying yourself. Taking up your cross. And following Jesus. And let's look at each one. So first, denying yourself.

[10:26] And I think this concept of self-denial can be pretty easily misconstrued. So let's talk about what it is and what it isn't. So self-denial isn't doing hard things for the sake of doing hard things, right?

So I grew up in the 90s. I graduated from high school in 1998. And there was a lot of, like, extreme Christianity. Do you guys remember this? Did other people remember the 90s? And it was like, kiss your Christian summer goodbye, you know?

Like when it talked about missions organizations and things. And, you know, or just do hard things. Like that was a tagline in different Christian organizations. And I remember thinking, well, there's this thing that seems really horrible.

So that must be the thing that God wants me to do. You don't relate to this. Those of you who are a certain age. I mean, there is a recognition in that mindset that following Jesus goes against the great new culture, right?

But the problem is the focus can very quickly become you. It's that hard thing that you're doing, right? And for what it's worth, this same nameless missions organization is still around.

[11:32] And their new tagline is, use your summer for Jesus. Inspiring this generation to wholly serve Christ. Right? Your eyes are on Jesus.

That's the difference. Secondly, self-denial isn't just attachment. A lot of religions practice self-denial. And there's even been a research that's kind of in pop culture recently with people like Jordan Peterson and kind of the new Stoics.

And the message is often some variation of if you deny your ego, your false self, and your disordered desires and attachments, then you'll be a better person, more at peace, etc., etc.

And again, there's some good in that, right? And recognizing that our own community can be dependent on the actions of other people or situations. That there's a lot we can't control.

Those are good things. But I just want to respectfully say that if all we're doing is just trying to detach from things, to just not care as much, that's going to depend on our own strength to carry out.

[12:37] And the thing we actually need to recognize is that the way the true peace and worship is not self-mastery. It's not trying harder.

It's not a thing we do or don't do. It's death. But what kind of death? The death of our will.

And so what self-denial is, is submission to the will of Jesus. And we see Paul working this out all over his epistles. One of the clearest summaries is Galatians 2.20.

I have been crucified with Christ. And I no longer live. But Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

And there's no clearer sign of this, this reality, that the sacrament of baptism that we're about to celebrate with Aubrey Worsman. Because in baptism we acknowledge that our old sin nature has been put to death.

[13:42] And that we're receiving the Holy Spirit in exchange. That we're being raised to new life in Christ. And that life in the Spirit enables us to take the next step of the discipleship.

We take up our houses. Now again, what is this? So it's not asking WWJD. Again, that was like another thing. The bracelets, you know?

What would Jesus do? And here's the thing. I think sometimes we boil following Jesus down to just certain decision points. Like point to point to point. We kind of leapfrogged.

Like, okay, here's this next thing I need to do. But we can't really ask that question unless we're one with Christ. Unless we live the way Christ lived. Unless our wills have been integrated with His. Teacher Lomhocker calls this completely oblivious of self. We have to be totally oblivious of self. And that's what Jesus is saying here. In the taking up of our crosses.

[14:40] So there's self-denial. The death of our wills. There's the taking up of our crosses. There's the merging and integrating of our wills with Jesus. And this isn't self-fortification.

This isn't beating ourselves up spiritually. We've seen really unhealthy versions of this throughout history. Right? We've talked about how there's bad theology out there.

About doing hard things for the sake of hard things. But, y'all, we don't have to go looking for suffering. Because it will find us. And when I talk about suffering. I don't just mean the suffering that comes from living in a world.

That's really at odds. From Jesus' teaching. I mean suffering that comes specifically as a result of following Jesus. The kind of suffering that means when we choose to live under his direction.

We are at odds. And that's hard. I'm going to read another Bonhoeffer quote from the Cross of Discipleship. The Cross is laid on every Christian.

[15:42] In fact, every command of Jesus is a call to die. With all our affections and lusts. The call of Christ. His baptism. Sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil.

Every day he encounters new temptations. And every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ's sake. The wounds and scars he receives in this fray are living tokens of this participation in the cross of our Lord.

And this sounds intense, right? But it's what we pray for every time we do a baptism. You're going to hear it in a few minutes when we baptize Aubrey.

We're going to exhort her to not be ashamed. To confess the faith of Christ crucified. To fight bravely under his banner against the world, the flesh, and the devil. And to continue as his faithful soldier and servant to the end.

And that brings us to our last part of following Jesus. Just following him. We deny ourselves. We take up our crosses. We follow him. And this is the key. This is where everything else hinges on.

[16:52] And it's the thing that prevents the wrong application of self-denial. Or taking on a cross that isn't ours to carry. Because our eyes aren't on ourselves.

They're on our Lord. Our gaze is on him. And he goes in front. And we go behind. And we walk in his footsteps. And keep our eyes on him who loved us and gave himself for us.

Who calls us by name. Who says, you are mine. So how do we train ourselves to get in the arena that Bonhoeffer talks about here?

Well, we begin with sacrament baptism. Confession of faith, right? But then once we do that, we have this dailiness. And the most powerful way I know to follow Jesus and to stay on this path is to incorporate spiritual practices like silence and prayer and fasting and scripture memory into our daily lives.

To be in deep community with other believers and to receive the sacraments. To receive baptism. To come to the Lord's table weekly and be fed by them. And I know I talked earlier about extreme asceticism.

[18:07] But there's a difference between that and healthy spiritual disciplines. Or practices. Throughout the Bible. And especially in the New Testament. With Jesus and his disciples. And with Paul.

It's an expected part of the Christian life. But these practices are training. To strengthen our God with Jesus. So Aubrey's going to come up in just a minute.

We're going to baptize her. And then we're all going to come to the Lord's table. And we'll continue in our worship. And then when you go home. I want to give you my work. I just want to suggest that you pick something to try.

Maybe it's a period of silence. You write it down on your calendar. Maybe you memorize a Bible verse this week. And you meditate on it. Or you fast for a meal or two. But ask the Lord.

How can I see you more clearly? How can I have more of you in my life? I want more of you more. I want your spirit to fill me. And see what comes up.

[19:09] And try to get this with a buddy. Because it's always important to do this with people. To have accountability. I'll be your buddy. If you want. Just send me an email. Text me. And then try it.

And in the same way. You exercise. And you lift weights. To be healthy. Right? You can try these spiritual practices. And when it's hard. You pray. And when you fail. You pray.
And church. If we engage in these practices. Consistently. Over time. And I know some of you do. If we burn in our lives. Around Eucharistic worship. As a community. We will be transformed. We will. One last thing. As we close. The life of discipleship. Of faith.
It's not linear. Right? So let's just come back to Peter. We've already seen this. Peter confesses Jesus. And then. He has this huge error. Where he just completely face plants.
[20:09] But then he gets to witness. Jesus transfigured. In all his glory. On the mountain. But then he denies Jesus. But then Jesus restores him. And he's one of the key leaders.
In the early church. So not linear. But the general trajectory. Was stronger. And deeper. And it was consistent.
Listen to some of the last words. He wrote. Shortly before he was murdered. He wrote. He's in his first epistle. But you. Are a chosen people.
A royal priesthood. A holy nation. God's special possession. That you may declare. The praises of him. Who called you. Out of darkness.
Into his wonderful light. Friends. He's talking about you. He's talking about us. Whatever suffering. We experience. Whatever pain. It is nothing.
[21:07] Compared to the deep. And abiding joy. Of belonging to the Lord Jesus. And living in his wonderful life. May he strengthen us. On this walk of discipleship.
To be faithful. Lord. Thank you. Thank you for calling us. I pray that you would respond.
I pray that you would strengthen us. And give us courage. All the days of our lives. And Lord. If there are people here. That have not made this. This decision.
To follow you. Lord. I pray that. You would speak to them. That they would long for you. Lord. I thank you for building us. Into your household.
That we are living in cornerstone. That we are living in stone. With you as the cornerstone. Jesus. We praise you. And we thank you. We pray for offering. As she is baptized. And as she joins our household today.
[22:05] In your household. She becomes part of your family. Lord. We pray that you would fill her. With your spirit. And bless her. All the days of your life. Amen. Amen. Amen.
So. Amen.