

I Do Not Know the Man

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the AM service on the 5th of April 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, I Do Not Know the Man, and is from Matthew chapter 26, verse 69, through to chapter 27, verse 2.

Almighty God, we pray that your word will be written in our hearts, that we may be better servants of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christians fail and Christians fall. And probably all of us have heard all too many stories or even known all too many people who, as Christians, have failed and fallen.

And all of us are vulnerable to the same thing. All of us are vulnerable to temptation. All of us are weak under pressure.

[1 : 1 2] And often, when it's least expected, Christians fail and Christians fall.

Yet what we see in public is not the beginning of the problem. What we see in public is the end of a process. For there is almost inevitably a private fall before there is a public fall.

And so then we all need prayer. We all need to pray for ourselves, for each other, as Christian people.

St. Paul said, if you think you're standing firm, be careful, lest you fall. And Peter is an example and a warning to us all.

It was the night before Good Friday. Jesus had had a meal with his disciples in the upper room.

[2 : 1 8] Judas had gone out to arrange the betrayal. Jesus took his disciples across out of the city of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, and into the Garden of Gethsemane.

And there Jesus had prayed. And then he was arrested. And then during the evening and during the night, Jesus was on trial to the Jewish high priests and elders.

And Peter, alone of the disciples, had followed where they took Jesus to the courtyard of the high priest's house. Probably a wealthy house with a courtyard.

And there during the night while Jesus is in a room of the house somewhere being tried by these Jewish leaders, a servant girl speaks to Peter.

You also were with Jesus the Galilean, she said. The words of a servant girl hardly a threat to Peter.

[3 : 2 4] It's not a man, it's not a soldier, it's not even a mature woman, not a free person, a slave, and a mere girl at that. And her words are hardly a serious allegation.

You were with him, Jesus the Galilean. But Peter's response evades the issue. He denied it before all of them saying, I do not know what you are talking about.

Hardly something to prompt a lie, surely. It's not really a serious allegation, he's not really being accused of something, he's not under threat of being arrested or himself put on trial.

Doesn't seem that he's in danger. If he were, surely they would have arrested him in the garden when Jesus was arrested. If he were in danger, surely they would have arrested Peter when he cut off the ear of the man in the garden.

But no, they didn't, Jesus was their target. Surely here in this courtyard, Peter has nothing to fear. And yet, he denies being with Jesus to a mere servant girl.

[4 : 3 7] Peter retreats out of the courtyard proper where there's probably a fire in the centre and goes to the porch, the grand entrance into this courtyard, maybe just a bit away from the people who are standing around.

Time passes. When he went out to the porch, another servant girl saw him and she said to the bystanders, this man was with Jesus of Nazareth.

Again, not serious threat, surely. Again, just another servant girl. Peter's denial, though, is stronger than the first. again, he denied it with an oath.

I do not know the man. A blatant denial, not just an evasion of the issue here. I do not know the man. And he denied it with an oath, we're told, which would be something like invoking God's name to underline solemnly the truth of his statement.

Though, of course, it wasn't a truthful statement, but it's saying, yes, by God's name, or something like that, I do not know the man and I speak the truth. Peter's in dangerous territory here.

[6 : 04] There is danger in taking oaths generally. Jesus warned against it at least on two occasions in Matthew's Gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount early in his ministry, and then more recently in chapter 23.

Peter's denial is deliberate. It's not just forgetfulness, it's not just a fleeting mistake, but invoking an oath shows just a deliberate statement of falsehood, fear.

And he verges on taking the Lord's name in vain. After a little while, the bystanders came up and said to Peter, certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.

The third accusation, again, probably some time has passed, Luke tells us about an hour, and now it's the bystanders generally, not just a servant girl. Now the accusations have increased a bit in tempo.

Surely you are also one of them, not just you were with him, but now you are one of them. The accusations are hotting up, the temperatures hotting up for Peter.

[7 : 15] the basis of this accusation is his accent. Galileans from the north were renowned for their slow, uncouth, almost perhaps vulgar, certainly rural way of speaking.

Indeed, so notorious were they at speaking badly that the Jerusalem synagogues refused to allow Galileans to pronounce the final blessings in their services.

probably a statement of snobbery, really. But Peter's accent doesn't mean that he's a follower of Jesus. There would have been many Galileans in Jerusalem for the Passover festival.

They're jumping to a conclusion that logically doesn't follow, and yet, of course, they are right. He is a follower of Jesus Christ. The heat is turned up on Peter, and again he denies.

And this time, the strongest of his three denials. He began to curse, and he swore an oath, I do not know the man. Not just now an oath, but now a curse.

[8 : 28] Cursing what and whom? It doesn't mean swearing in the sense that we perhaps use the idea today of somebody cursing. It could be that he's cursing Jesus.

That would be very serious indeed. more likely is that he's bringing down curses on himself. That is, if I am telling a lie here, may God bring his curses upon me.

The Old Testaments have got several sections of curses, things that God would do as punishment for people who fail God's laws. They're severe things. And Peter here is calling down those curses on himself if what he says is a falsehood.

Of course it is a falsehood, but he's trying to show the people round about that he speaks the truth. I do not know the man. I do not know the man, that man, as almost a statement of disdain or contempt for his Lord, Jesus Christ.

Three denials, each time getting stronger. But they're not the beginning of Peter's error. That comes earlier in the chapter, as we've seen in recent weeks.

[9 : 43] For earlier on the same night, Peter said to Jesus, though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you. And Jesus warns him.

Jesus said to him, truly I tell you this very night before the cock crows, you will deny me three times. And we saw then that Peter doesn't heed Jesus' warning.

He goes on to say, even though I must die with you, I will not deny you. It's a cocky claim, isn't it, if you excuse the pun.

And Jesus rebukes it at the time and warns Peter that he will deny Jesus Christ. But Peter doesn't heed the warning.

But that's not all about Peter's mistake either because after that episode they're going to the garden of Gethsemane and there Jesus exhorts his disciples, Peter included, to pray.

[10 : 44] And they don't. But Jesus doesn't exhort them to pray for Jesus, he exhorts them to pray for themselves. So we read in verse 41, Jesus speaking to the disciples, stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial or temptation.

The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. And Jesus prays and when he comes back to the disciples, they're asleep.

He wakes them, he urges them to pray. Jesus goes and prays, he comes back to his disciples, they're asleep again. He wakes them, he urges them to pray. Jesus prays, he comes back and they're asleep again.

Three times he exhorts them to pray, not for himself who's about to die on a cross, but for themselves so that they will be strong enough to resist temptation and stand in the face of trial. And three times Peter, head of the disciples, fails the exhortation of Jesus to pray. Cockshore Peter, so certain, so safe, so strong, so convinced of being able to stand against temptation and trial, sleeps, ignoring the warnings, ignoring the pleas to pray.

[12:06] The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Three times he failed to pray, three times he slept, and three times he denies Jesus Christ.

And if you excuse the expression, he's made a real cock-up of his being a disciple here. he's ignored Jesus' warnings, and he's ignored the exhortations to pray.

And if you think you're standing firm, be careful, lest you fall. When I went to England to live a bit over five years ago, the Bishop of Gloucester, in which diocese I was, was on leave.

He was on leave because he'd been charged with gross indecency. And each service in the church where I was, we prayed for the Bishop of Gloucester.

A month later he resigned. The charges were sustained. But no doubt his fall began well before it was public.

[13:17] A private fall, before a public fall. Were people praying then? Were people praying before he fell publicly, for him, that he may resist temptation and stand firm in the face of trial and so on?

Well, no doubt some were. But it seemed to me the zeal for praying for the Bishop came after the fall, in a sense, when it was too late. We must pray for each other.

We must pray for each other that we do not fall, that we do not fail, that we stand firm in Christian faith, that we resist temptation and stand firm under pressure to give in and fail to witness to Jesus Christ.

none of us is standing so firm that we are immune from temptation or immune from trial. All of us are vulnerable to weakness.

For all of us, Jesus' words are true that the flesh is weak, willing though the spirit may be. We must therefore pray for ourselves that we stay awake and that we may not come into the time of trial.

[14:43] We must pray for each other. We must pray for our Christian leaders. If you think you're standing firm, be careful lest you fall.

the cock crowed. They say that the announcement of the change of watch was the cock crow.

A trumpet would sound to indicate it was time at 3am in the morning for the watch to change.

Maybe that's what's being referred to here. Or maybe it's just a rooster crowing in the middle of the night.

the cock crowed. And Peter remembered. He remembered Jesus saying before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.

And Jesus' prophecies come true. The Jesus who had just been mocked by the soldiers saying prophesy, prophesy, who hits you, his words of prophecy are true.

[15:51] He predicted Peter would deny him three times and deny him he did, failing to heed Jesus' warnings and exhortations to pray.

Jesus, his every words as a prophet, fulfilled at every point. And Peter went out and wept bitterly. What a failure.

What a coward. He'd had every opportunity. He'd been warned by Jesus. He'd been exhorted to pray and now he's fallen catastrophically and he weeps bitterly.

But what a contrast to Jesus who's on trial at the same time in a room in this courtyard, in this house. Jesus who stood firm because he prayed, who stood firm and uttered the truth and faced even death on a cross.

Compared to Peter, weak, not even faced with a serious allegation in those three accusations, with perhaps little to lose, not really in danger and yet denies knowing or being with Jesus.

[17:02] Jesus with everything to lose, Peter with none, but it's Jesus who stands firm under pressure, under trial and in the face of temptation. What a contrast between the two.

What a contrast also between Peter and Judas, one of Jesus' other twelve disciples. In the very next verses of the next chapter, Judas goes out and hangs himself, sorrowful at what he's done to betray Jesus Christ to his death.

Both Peter and Judas fail Jesus and fail him badly. Both regret their actions. Both are sorrowful for their actions. One suicides, and one is restored by Jesus.

Godly sorrow produces repentance which leads to salvation. Worldly sorrow produces death. 2 Corinthians 7 verse 10.

For Peter it's the former, for Judas the latter. For Peter his godly sorrow leads to repentance and that issues in salvation. For Judas his worldly sorrow led to his suicide and death.

[18:17] For Peter you see after the resurrection just a few days away from this catastrophic failure and fall, Jesus risen takes Peter aside on the beach and speaks to him tender words and reinstates him.

Peter feed my flock, feed my sheep, feed my lambs. three times forgiven and restored by Jesus once for each denial.

What an abundance of God's mercy is there from Jesus to this repentant sinner. Extraordinarily perhaps Peter who's failed so dismally to confess Jesus here in the courtyard of the high priest is entrusted with the task of confessing Jesus to the world.

That's forgiveness, amazing forgiveness from Jesus Christ. How do we respond to repentant sinners? Are we quick to extend the same mercy that Jesus extended to Peter?

Or are we quick to condemn? Jesus' response to Peter is a challenge for us. Our world is full of unforgiveness.

[19:38] Our world is full of residual bitterness and resentment and broken relationships. And sadly often Christians are the slowest of all to forgive. forgive. But how dare we call ourselves by the name of Christ when he is so quick to forgive and if we are so unwilling to forgive.

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. Their decision's made.

They've made it during the night at the trial. But now that it's morning they meet again because Jewish trials had to occur in daylight. So they rubber stamping, making valid or legal the illegal trial of the early hours of the morning.

They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor. If it were not for Jesus' crucifixion, we would know virtually nothing, if anything, about Pontius Pilate, a nobody in effect in world history.

It just happened that he was what was called the prefect or the procurator at the time of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. For 10 years, AD 26 to 36, Pilate was the procurator of Judea, Samaria and Idumea.

[21:08] Pilate was the son of Herod the great called Herod Archelaus was so bad a despot that he was sacked by the Romans and they put their own governor or prefect there in place and Pilate is the fifth of those people.

Pilate was intensely disliked by the Jews. He was a fairly stupid man it seems. He brought imperial banners into the city of Jerusalem with pictures of the emperors on it as statements of worship. That was a horrific thing to do to the Jews. And the riots that followed him bringing those banners in led to many Jews dying. He used temple money to build an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem. An abominable thing to do with sacred money. That was devoted to the temple and temple purposes. And yet it's to this man that the Jews now turn.

The one they so despise is the one who for them has power over life and death. For the Jews under Roman rule were unable to put anybody to death.

[22:22] Only the Romans could do that. And for the Jews the charge against Jesus was blasphemy. But that is not a charge that the Romans would recognize.

And so for Roman purposes the charge against Jesus was treason. This is the king. The one who's therefore treasonable against the Roman emperor. And so they handed over Jesus to Pilate.

Again fulfilling what Jesus himself had predicted. They will hand me over to the Gentiles he said in Matthew chapter 20. Pilate. So to Pilate they go.

Pilate the one who has control over life and death. Jesus is put to death later that day. But how wrong they were.

For he rose. He is risen. He is alive. Pilate doesn't have the power over death and life that the Jews thought.

[23:26] Jesus has power over life and death. He's conquered death and he lives and gives life to those who follow him. Repentant sinners like Peter.

It doesn't matter how far we've fallen in one sense. Jesus' forgiveness and mercy is greater and more extensive and Peter is testimony to that as indeed many Christians are through the ages. Jesus is the one who is Lord of life and conqueror of death. Let us take courage from him in the face of temptation and trial.

Let us draw strength from his example under trial. Let us stand firm in his strength and not our own. Amen. Amen.