

John 18:12-27 “Denial Ain’t Just a River”

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Preacher: Will Spink

[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

As we open God's Word together again this morning, I mean, what a gift it is that we get to do that, right? That we get to open the Word of truth and hear the truth of God's greatness and read it together.

We're going to return to John chapter 18, John's account of this fateful night where Jesus is actually going to head to the cross.

He has just been betrayed by Judas and his band of several hundred men, Roman soldiers, Jewish leaders. And John has kept our attention fixed firmly on Jesus.

All the way through. He's the last man standing, controlling all the others, protecting his disciples. It reminded me this week of this iconic photo from 1989, the day after the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, China, when one man, you can barely even see him down there.

[1 : 24] He stood alone before a line of military tanks and he brought them to a halt. Tank man, he's known as. He was going to have to do this.

Stepping forward bravely to stand against unjust power for the sake of others, even if it costs him. And now in these next verses, John turns our eyes back and forth from Jesus to Peter and back again.

It seems a little bit odd the way John mixes these scenes together. But actually, if you think about it, this is a literary convention that you've seen or read hundreds of times.

Right? It's in so many movies. When you go back and forth to draw a contrast. Right? To highlight specific differences in the two scenes or the two characters you're watching.

Maybe you remember it most famously in a movie that cuts back and forth between a baptism in a church and violence on the streets. Let's pick up our reading at verse 12 of John 18.

[2 : 32] With our eyes still on Jesus, the last man standing. And let's read this first scene. Remember, just a few moments before, those guys had all fallen to the ground before the I am of Jesus.

The last man standing in total control of the situation. But now he helps them back up. And they complete the arrest. First they led him to Annas.

For he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.

So many priests here, it can be easy to get confused. Now, Annas has been a high priest for a decade. Okay? But whereas the Jews elected him to that role and appointed him there for life, the Romans didn't want it to work that way with positions of power.

They wanted a lot more turnover. And so Annas' sons and son-in-law Caiaphas have been taking turns serving as high priest. But Annas is still looked to by many Jews as the real high priest.

[4 : 02] So John takes this opportunity when he's telling us about this to remind us that Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas, had advised the Sanhedrin not long ago that even though some people might be upset, having this Jesus die would be best for the rest of them.

One man die for the people. Two reasons I think John highlights it here. The first is that it makes really clear to us that Jesus is willingly going to an unjust trial, right?

These guys he's standing before have already decided, they're already on the record that he should die. That would be a good thing if this guy would die. But more importantly, just as we saw back in chapter 11, Caiaphas spoke better than he knew, didn't he?

John tells us he was prophesying actually. Jesus would indeed die for the people and all the other people who would be gathered to him, people like you and me if we trust him.

God is using the wicked words of men for a greater purpose. Love how he does that. John reminds us yet again that Jesus is heading to the unjust trial and the biased rulers and the awful cross in our place.

[5 : 30] Jesus stands for us. Jesus stands for us. And then, as he stands, the camera pans back behind us, this large group that's escorting Jesus, and it finds Peter following at a distance.

Verse 15. Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Now, you might wonder who that is. We don't know for sure.

Many people think it's John himself, the author of this gospel who sometimes refers to himself without using his name, but it doesn't matter too much, whether it was John or another of the 12 disciples.

But that disciple was known to the high priest. So since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, but Peter stood outside at the door.

So that other disciple who was known to the high priest went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door and brought Peter in. The servant girl at the door said to Peter, you also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?

[6 : 39] He said, I am not. Now, the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.

Now, let's not be too hard on Peter, okay? I mean, look, at least he's following, right? At least he's there. Most of the other disciples have left.

They've gone to look for safety or sleep. Peter probably goes here following behind Jesus with the intent of being courageous, loyal, even heroic, perhaps.

You can tell already tonight he's been looking for a chance, hasn't he? But he fails. There's no other way to put it. It's even more painful than that in the original Greek because we remember the power. Peter's heard the words. Jesus has just said, ego, a me, I am. And Peter says, uke, a me, I am not.

[7 : 50] But the contrast couldn't be clearer than the two of them. Jesus' embrace of the truth. Peter's denial of the truth.

You with Jesus? I am not. It seems unlikely Peter planned this response, doesn't it?

But confronted by the question of a mere servant girl, his knees buckle, his strength fails, and the one who had said that he would be with Jesus, he would die with Jesus, he can't even admit to living with them.

Perhaps it was a small denial to one not very intimidating person, maybe nobody else heard, but it opens the door to a night of denial of his Lord, doesn't it?

Before we apply this to ourselves, let me observe something here for those of us who struggle with the Bible stories of Jesus being true.

[8 : 59] Did this really happen? I want you to think, here are Jesus' disciples now, all of them, either abandoning him, betraying him, or denying him, as in Peter's case.

The future leader of the church putting his failures on public record. That, friends, is a very strong mark of historicity when you're reading a written account.

When the authors of Scripture write of their own failures, failures, and maybe you think, no big deal, you don't really care if this story is true, I mean, you don't follow Jesus, so no big deal if it is, you don't, if you deny that you follow Jesus, that's just telling the truth, right?

Just being honest. But if this story is true, what about all the others? I mean, what about his dying on the cross?

Next chapter. Or his rising from the dead, the next chapter. If everything John writes about him is true, then you can find a life in Jesus.

[10 : 11] You must find your life in Jesus. I mean, which one is it? It's one or the other. Either they made all of this up and threw themselves under the bus in the process just for good measure because they liked to embarrass themselves.

Or they told these embarrassing, exposing stories because they're true. That's what happened. Back to our failures.

I remember a couple years ago when Bill Nash was teaching us about sharing Jesus with our neighbors. I don't know if that sounded right. I didn't mean Bill Nash was our biggest failure. Sorry, Bill.

Back to our failures. Bill Nash. It's not the way I thought about it the first time. I actually remember Bill teaching us about sharing Jesus with our neighbors.

And he said, a basic beginning is making sure that the people you know know that you're a Christian. That you actually follow Jesus.

[11:17] That you're a disciple of His. Peter wants to keep that information to himself here, doesn't he? He doesn't run Jesus down. He doesn't yell terrible things at Him.

He just avoids associating with Him. I don't know if you're like me, but I often find that it is easier than I realize to keep my mouth shut about Jesus day in and day out. often even without planning to. I used to be committed to telling people about Him. I'll tell you about college, Will.

I went to Clemson and surprisingly, perhaps, to some of you, I was a bit intense back then. I used banned book week on campus as a chance to read from the Bible on a microphone in the Clemson Amphitheater.

Saved them all. When the syllabus said pick one of four books to read, I bought all four of them. I was that guy. And I came to that first class with a copy of each one and a guy sitting in front of me, he hadn't gotten any of them and so he asked me if he could have one of mine.

[12:37] Of course. And he said, hey, how much was it? I said, just keep it. Jesus has given me way more than that for free.

I'm happy for you to have it. You want to know about Jesus? That's freshman Will. That's what I was like. It's the way I am on a missions trip, right? Boy, if you put me on a plane on a missions trip, then you better watch out because the Muslim guy next to me and the Buddhist guy sitting right in front of me, they're going to tell me their whole life stories and get a gospel presentation on scratch paper before that plane lands.

I'm in representative of Jesus mode that whole trip and in the taxi, at the restaurant, all the time. It feels like I'm in enemy territory. I can't wait to tell people about him.

But just last week, I was sitting at a restaurant with some friends and our kind young waitress asks me this, can I get you some of our free homemade sourdough bread?

And I say, is that a question? If I ever say no to free homemade sourdough, please check my pulse. But I went the entire meal with no comment about the free bread Jesus has given me.

[13:58] It was like she was asking for it. I mean, it crossed my mind to ask her if she knew about Jesus' free gift and how much he gives us, but I just decided it was easier not to.

Another day, just two days after that, I went to drop off some donations at a thrift store and the young man asked if I wanted a receipt. No thanks. He said, but you don't want credit for it?

No thanks. I mean, I had a schedule to keep. I was in a hurry, but not even one comment about Jesus giving me all the credit that I could ever need or anything like that.

I had somewhere to go. I didn't even talk to him about Jesus. In those small, non-intimidating interactions, are we with Jesus?

Are we not his representatives then too? Does he have to send you on a plane across the world? I'm not suggesting that you need a corny pun to bring Jesus into conversation.

[15:07] It's not really recommended. But are you looking for an excuse to leave him out of it? What I've seen in myself is that those habits of denying, even silently, just living so much of my life without reference to him, I'm denying my relationship with him.

Those habits are easy to make and they're hard to break if I'm focused day in and day out on my comfort, my safety, my schedule. While Jesus is standing, Peter has fallen.

Maybe we can relate. Is Jesus still standing? What's going on with him? Scene three goes inside the house to Jesus again.

Verse 19, the high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Do you still have a bunch of followers out there that you've incited, you've stirred them up to cause trouble? What have you been telling them to do? What should we expect? Now the problem with this is that this is not the legal way to handle this arrest. This is not what should be happening.

[16:32] Witnesses are supposed to be called first and that should actually start with witnesses for the defense. The accused doesn't get questioned in Jewish law, certainly not by the high priest and Jesus points this out.

Jesus answered him, I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple where all Jews come together. I've said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me?

Ask those who have heard me what I said to them. They know what I said. Call a witness. It's public knowledge.

Nothing will surprise you. Your men just watched me tell my followers to put their swords away.

Those who have heard and seen me teaching are the ones who should be testifying.

That's how this should work. And when he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand saying, is that how you answer the high priest?

[17 : 35] Jesus answered him, if what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong. But if what I said is right, why do you strike me?

Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas, the high priest. I'm speaking the truth. Jesus says, I'm urging him to do this the right way.

I'm telling you that you don't have to worry about my followers starting a riot. Even though with a slap, the violence against Jesus has begun.

Now here's someone a bit more dangerous and influential than the servant girl, right? Jesus is being threatened unjustly.

A pattern that's going to continue throughout his trial. And the Jews are rushing this trial overnight because they fear the Passover feast and the upcoming Sabbath will delay their big chance, their chance to finish Jesus while they finally have him.

[18 : 44] They're going to do things they'd never do otherwise. Let's get him under the cover of darkness in the wee hours of the morning with no one to testify on his behalf. Here he is, now he's really trapped.

Is Jesus intimidated? Is he caught into self-protecting silence where he'll deny the truth? Not hardly. He responds boldly, truthfully, even indirectly instructing the high priest himself about the just manner to proceed.

Jesus declares the open statement of the truth. He's not hiding from anything, is he? His message never changes. No matter where he is or to whom he's speaking, he may be bound, he may be slapped, but he speaks boldly and he stands firmly no matter the pain or the cost.

So he's off to another home, but that's next week. John wants first to finish Peter's part of the story here.

Verse 25, back where we left Peter at the warm, crackling, charcoal fire. Peter. Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself, so they said to him, you also are not one of his disciples, are you?

[20 : 03] He denied it and said, I am not. One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, did I not see you in the garden with him?

Peter again denied it and at once a rooster crowed. While Jesus is standing, succeeding for Peter, Peter keeps failing, denying again, uke me, I am not.

I bet Peter never thought he would deny Jesus. He's a pretty confident guy. It was just earlier this evening that Peter had passionately proclaimed that even if everyone else ran away, he would stand with Jesus to the death if need be.

Just tonight. I will never deny you. But denial ain't just a river, you know. You'll get that in a minute. Credit to Andrew Peterson. It's a helpful line because denial is not just a one-time thing. It's something you get caught in, isn't it?

[21 : 25] A small denial becomes a big problem. It snowballs into these repeated and more passionate denials of Christ.

Peter gives in to his sin. He cracks the door on indulging his fear, his pride. Maybe this is a good place for all of us to consider the warning that Paul gives in 1 Corinthians chapter 10.

Therefore, let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. especially when you're sure you're going to be good.

Watch out. When you know you're strong, when you think you're better than everyone else, Peter, watch out. Peter thought he would stand.

Yet again tonight, where the spirit is willing, the flesh is still weak. Peter blows it again. Perhaps the first time he was just taken off guard, right now he'll get, nope, now he's stuck in the lie.

[22 : 33] Now he's committed to distancing himself from Jesus rather than standing by his king. Peter swore it would never happen like this.

And then it did. I bet most of us can relate. You know that feeling? Oh, it's awful.

You ever failed to stand with Jesus or speak for Jesus when you said you would? Just last week, you may notice I'm not having to go far back for these struggles in my life.

I met with a group of men I love and we're talking about the rhythms and the habits in our lives that either draw us towards Jesus or kind of lead us away from Jesus.

And I zeroed in for that day on one small change I committed to making. Even just privately in my own home, that's all it was.

[23 : 40] The first few minutes when I get out of bed in the morning, I want to talk first with Jesus. To contemplate Jesus. To start my day with him.

This Friday I committed to the same thing because I was 0 for 7 this week.

Wordle, ESPN, the news on my phone, that they kept getting my attention first. It was a small thing. It seemed so easy. I was really embarrassed that I didn't do it. When I said I would. This is something Jesus wants me to do.

I said he wants me to be with him. He welcomes me to be with him. I'm going to do that. And again, no. Where have you fallen like Peter?

[24 : 38] Like me? Whom have you kept running down? What have you kept clicking on? When have you kept silent?

What is Jesus calling you to do? And you know he is, but you are too self-protective to leave your comfort to stand with him. Even when you come here every week and open his word every day and you see Jesus standing there succeeding in much more dangerous and trying circumstances than you, you find you keep failing.

Even when you're sure you won't. Even in the areas you're convinced you've got this one. It should break our hearts, shouldn't it? Even though our failures aren't recorded in Scripture for perpetuity like Peter's, I mean, there's still denials of our Savior.

It's unfaithful to the faithful one. And this episode with Peter is not going to be the series finale and wrap everything up nicely.

We have to wait till the end of John's gospel to wrap up Peter's story here. But there is a cliffhanger. There's a cliffhanger here in this passage that is full of hope.

[26 : 05] And if you're discouraged right now and if you feel the failure that I've felt and feel, you need to get this part. Peter again denied and at once a rooster crowed.

What will come of Peter, we wonder, as the scene closes? Before we leave him, John wants to point us back to Jesus' upper room prediction just a few hours ago.

Jesus says to Peter, will you lay down your life for me? Are you so sure? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow until you've denied me three times.

Certainly not. Peter was so confident. Three times tonight? Yep.

See, Jesus anticipates our failure. He knows our weakness. He's not surprised by our sin, is he?

[27 : 17] And, listen, this is so hopeful. He doesn't reject us because of those things. He didn't send Peter away. Go home, Peter. You're going to blow it.

He didn't tell him not to bother coming to the garden to pray with him or try. No. No, instead of rejecting us, he invites us to repentance.

And there's no question the sound of the rooster's crow was bad news for Peter, right? Can you feel that moment? It cut him to his heart. It exposed him as the denier that he was in that moment.

I bet he remembered that moment on many more days when he heard that sound to start his day.

Can you imagine waking up to that noise? In Luke's gospel, when Jesus tells Peter that he's going to deny him, Jesus also tells Peter that he has prayed for his faith to stand and for him to turn again, to repent.

To repent means to turn from your sin in your heart to hate it because it's a denial, isn't it? It's a denial of the goodness, the sufficiency, the care of Jesus.

[28 : 40] You're going to find those things somewhere else. Turn from that back to Jesus. That's repentance. When Peter hears the rooster, meets Jesus' gaze passing by the courtyard apparently, and considers what he's done, he weeps bitterly.

Friends, our failure, our weakness, our sin is worth weeping over and repenting of.

When we turn back to Jesus, as worthy as it is that we be weeping in that moment, he does not meet us with a soul-crushing gaze.

Can you imagine how capable he would have been of doing that to Peter in that moment? Maybe we'd expect it, but Jesus doesn't run us off.

He welcomes us back. See, Jesus loves failures. Don't miss or forget that today. If you have failed even big time, there is great hope today because the gospel is not about you being strong enough or successful enough.

[29 : 59] The gospel is about God being gracious enough. Amen? There's forgiveness here with Jesus because he has succeeded where we've failed.

He has spoken boldly where we've been silent. He has sacrificed himself when we've protected ourselves.

Your denial, your failure, your sin is not bigger than his grace.

Please know that. Please see that here. In his great kindness, Jesus makes Peter a leader in his church, an author of holy scripture, a trophy of his grace.

That is the kind of king that he is. Don't you love that? There's no other kind you can have. You've blown it too many times. I've messed up again.

[31 : 00] And listen, here's the deal. I don't want you to think that it's just that forgiveness is out there. It's this thing, this intangible idea. Y'all, if that's all there is, if it's just a transaction, forgiveness in place of my denial, I'll just do it again.

I mean, I'm not waking up early when I could get extra sleep and forgiveness. Is that all it is? I'll deny him again. Right? What helps us change?

What makes us different? What gives us hope to stand? It's that when we repent, when we look back with tears flowing down our face, Jesus is still standing there and not to condemn, but to welcome us back into a relationship with him.

Not a cold transaction. Not a pill to take. A relationship. A relationship. I'm not going to wake up early for condemnation. To feel shame. I know that.

But this Jesus stands for me. He speaks boldly to injustice where I've failed. He prays for my restoration rather than my condemnation.

[32 : 23] He doesn't merely pass out forgiveness. He offers himself as the one who forgives. The forgiving friend that you can have and be with all the time.

That makes me long to be with him. So do that for your heart. It makes me want to stand for him. It makes me eager to speak for him to everyone, everywhere.

He's that worth talking about. Do you see him standing there for you? See the love, compassion in his eyes?

You see him take the pain that you deserve? Don't you want to stand and speak and live with him and for him?

To be not merely a denier. I know it. We've all been there. But a repentant, forgiven, and restored follower? A friend of Jesus?

[33 : 31] Don't you want that relationship? John Newton was infamously the captain of a slave ship. Awful.

Denying God's very existence at the time. Running from God. When he met Jesus and finally became convinced that Jesus loved even him in spite of himself, he struggled deeply with his failures and sins.

So when he became a preacher, he always preached of amazing grace that saved a wretch like me. He wept often over his sins until the day he died.

But Newton had turned to see one thing bigger than his big sin. The grace of his Savior. As his mind failed him and he neared his death, he said, My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things. That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior. He couldn't stop talking and singing about Jesus, the Savior, with amazing grace enough for all of us.

[35 : 00] In a few weeks, we'll be back around the charcoal fire and listen to Peter talk with Jesus about his love. But for now, the rooster's crow is the sound of conviction.

The call to repentance. And so wonderfully, it is the voice of gospel good news.

Hope. Mercy. For you. The God who knows your weakness stands strong in your place as the last man standing and invites you and me in our greatest failures to run or crawl or even just cry out back to him this morning.

He will lift you up to live with him and for him. Let's ask for his help. Wonderful, merciful Savior.

Precious Redeemer and friend. We give you thanks for your forgiveness and that you have given us not merely a pardon, but yourself.

[36 : 19] Thank you that those of us with nothing else to offer, who've denied you way more than three times, find a rich welcome back to you.

You are so good to us and we worship you for your grace. And we praise you today, Lord Jesus. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.