

Decline, Denial, Distress

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 00] And at verse 54, looking at this passage from 54 through to verse 62 at the end of the chapter. At the end of the passage, sorry.

So that's verses 54 to 62. Now we're continuing, as you can see, with studying the life of Simon Peter, the various incidents we find recorded for us in the Gospels.

We looked some time ago at previous ones. There are probably two or three more that we need to look at just to complete that series of looking at Simon Peter's life and his experiences and the way that he was taught by Jesus as he went through these experiences as a disciple of Christ.

We saw last time how he was given insight in verses 31 to 34 about the aim and the purpose of Satan to try and get in amongst the disciples and to sift them, as he says, like wheat, and how after his recovery that Peter was going to be a means of strengthening them.

And Peter himself at that stage, as we'll see in a minute, was very reluctant to even consider the possibility that he would ever fail his Lord, that he would ever actually in any way do what he's now going to do in this passage and deny the Lord three times.

[1 : 28] This denial that's so well known in the history and the life of Peter, it wasn't something that came about altogether suddenly.

What we can actually see when we look at these verses and compare the other Gospel writers as well, what we can see is that this was actually part of a process, a process that involved Peter's self-confidence, Peter's reluctance to accept the word of his Lord at face value as it was, a process that involved less prayer than he should have had, as the Lord had actually said to him and the other disciples, while you're sleeping, rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

So you can see all of these elements as they form together a certain process spiritually in this man's experience, how each of them and how all of them as they come together actually lead directly into what happened here in his denial of the Lord, denying that he even knew the Lord, and therefore being untrue to his calling as a disciple and to the service of his master.

And when you go back to the other Gospels, you see in the likes of Mark, for example, you don't need to turn to it just now, but Mark chapter 14, verses 27 to 30, you meet Jesus there telling Peter about certain things like this that were going to happen, and Peter with his self-confidence saying, assuredly, though all others should forsake you, I will never do that.

And you put that along with the other elements you have here, and you see that there is a decline, or we can call a decline, a certain going back spiritually, or a reluctance, or many things that come into it, but we'll call it decline in the experience of this man, a decline actually that led to this denial.

[3 : 34] Secondly, that's the second point, a decline leads to denial, and thirdly, the denial, and especially after the Lord came and looked at Peter, thirdly, we'll look at distress.

So these are the three main points in the passage, decline, and denial, and distress on Peter's part. Now what does the decline actually involve, and how do we learn from that ourselves, and how do we apply it to ourselves, so as hopefully we will not decline, and if we have any decline at any time, that we can actually learn from these passages of the Bible, what to then do in times of decline, before it gets too bad, so that we can cut it off, and not end up like Peter, in some way or other, denying the Lord.

The first thing you notice there, is that it's saying that Peter, in verse 54, when they seized Jesus and led him, they brought him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. Now these words, we could make too much of them, but they're really also filled with a spiritual meaning for us, aren't they? He was following, but he was following at a distance.

He was not by the Lord's side, he was not there close to Jesus, and there's a spiritual point to be made, even in that as well. He had not stopped following him, but he wasn't actually beside him, he

wasn't close to him.

[5 : 03] And when you put all that together, you can actually see in that something, that is spiritually important, that's a characteristic of spiritual decline, on the part of any one of us, on the part of any spiritual disciple of Jesus, the spiritual decline, takes this as one of the characteristics.

It's not that we give up following Jesus, it's not that we want to give up following Jesus, but we come to follow him at a distance.

We come to follow him in a way that doesn't really have our heart as engaged in following him as it should be. Because that's where Peter is.

He's still a disciple, he's following Christ into the circumstances he's now in, but he's following him at a distance. And decline always takes that element as one of its chief characteristics, that we come to follow the Lord at a distance instead of closely.

And really it reminds us very tellingly how important it is in our lives spiritually to keep close to Jesus. And whenever we find a distance coming between ourselves and Jesus fully, then we have to actually get down and deal with that situation and deal with it appropriately.

[6 : 30] So the question for me tonight, to myself, I hope I put this to myself, like I say honestly I did before I came to preach tonight in Christ's name.

How close am I to Jesus? Am I letting things get between myself and living fellowship with Jesus on a regular daily basis or more?

Am I close to Jesus tonight? Am I concerned about keeping close to Jesus? Am I concerned if a distance grows between me and the Lord?

Am I concerned if my heart is no longer in my Bible reading, in my praying as it used to be and as it should be? Am I letting that distance come between myself and my Lord in my personal relationship with him?

Am I following him yet at a distance? Is my heart in the things that I do spiritually? Am I really engaged in that?

[7 : 35] Am I fully involved in that? Or has it come to be something of a distance between me and the Lord? You know, when you go back to the Old Testament, to the somewhat mysterious book of the Song of Solomon, which were different ways of approaching it, interpreting it, but if you take it to be a relationship of marriage or preparation for marriage, and certainly in many ways emblematic of the relationship between the Lord and his people, there is the young woman who is so much in love with this person, with her beloved, and she speaks about different circumstances in her experience, in her relationship with the beloved.

And in chapter 5, she is lying in bed and she is saying, I am asleep, yet my heart is awake. The voice of my beloved knocking at the door of her chamber, her bedroom.

And he is saying something to her, and what he says to her is, open to me, my dove, my undefiled, these wonderful poetic descriptions that he has for her.

And then he says that he has been there for a long time because he says, my head, my hair is filled or dripping with the dew of the night. And you see, from that, she has been hearing his knocking, she knows who it is, but then she starts making excuses.

She is very drowsy. She really just can't get out of bed in order to put on her over, her gown or whatever, and her slippers in order to go to the door, to unbolt the door and open it to her beloved.

[9 : 25] And that is how she is for some time. But then she says, I rose to open to my beloved. But my beloved was gone.

And then she had to go in search of him. That's how it can very easily be for us in our life spiritually. We hear the voice of Jesus, but it's somewhat at a distance.

Peter heard the voice of Jesus. He spoke to him. He warned him. He told him to pray and to watch so that he and his fellow disciples would not enter into temptation.

He wasn't really listening. He was letting that distance between himself and the Lord increase. So that when he came here to being confronted with being a disciple of Jesus, he denied him three times.

Are we tonight concerned really to listen to the voice of our beloved? Have you become drowsy in your own Christian experience?

[10 : 32] I don't mean drowsy in a church service. It happens to all of us all too easily. But drowsy spiritually in our souls. Drowsy so that we are content with just a passing recognition, if you like, of Christ knocking at the door of our hearts.

So let me put it this way. Are you afraid at any time if you let that sort of condition continue? Are you afraid that the time will come when Jesus will no longer be there for you?

Surely, of course, you say, yes, of course I am. Well, that means you keep close to him. And as the woman in the song of Solomon went out in search of her beloved, as she went about the streets, as she began asking those she met, have you seen my beloved?

And tell him, if you see him, that I am sick with love. Yes, she's now revived. She's realized her situation.

But she doesn't have her beloved close to her as he once was. So tonight, you see, don't despair if you feel that there's a distance come between you and the Lord.

[11 : 48] I don't think that that's the end of your spiritual journey that Christ has now done with you, that he won't have you back anymore. Go and search for him.

Go and seek after him. Go and look for him in the streets of the gospel. Take to your Bible. Take to your knees. Seek the Lord until again you appreciate his presence and his blessing filling your soul. Because that's what he desires you to do. Not to leave until the gap widens further. But tonight, let's concern ourselves with the whole issue of closeness to Christ.

Keep close to him. Keep close to him using the means of doing so that he's given you. Your Bible reading, your personal prayer life, the services of the church, the Lord's Supper, the fellowship of God's people, the prayer meeting.

These are all means that God has specifically in kindness given to us so that we'll know what it is to walk with Jesus and to seek that we stay close to him so that we do not fall into temptation.

[13 : 15] But not only is there distance from Christ, distance from Christ, but secondly in the decline there's actually siding with the world. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down amongst them.

The interesting thing there is that in the Greek text of the New Testament, when you see these words, they kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and then you read that Peter sat down amongst them.

The words are exactly the same, in the middle of and amongst them. The fire was in the middle of this courtyard which would be surrounded by the people that were there and yet Peter was right in the middle of these people.

These were people, not disciples of Jesus. These were people who had come to really just see what was going on and to actually see what would happen to this man now that he'd been arrested and brought into the high priest.

Many of these would be enemies of Jesus. Many of these would be quite glad to be rid of him. He was a troublemaker in their view. And Peter was right there amongst them, right in the middle.

[14 : 29] You know, when we become called to Jesus, or when we let our relationship with Jesus cool, something else is going to take its place.

There are no vacuums in our lives spiritually as human beings. things. And if we let our relationship to Jesus cool, and if the distance becomes increase, if it increases day by day, what's going to happen is the more you cool to Jesus, the more you're warm to the world.

The more you get cold in your relationship with Christ, the more that comes to be filled instead with the world and its worldliness. This man is a disciple of Jesus.

He's been following him at a distance, and now that he's come into the courtyard, what does he do? He sits with all of them, right in the middle of those who are going to find fault with Jesus.

And we need to apply that not only to ourselves personally, but to churches and to congregations as well. It's happening in our world right now.

[15 : 42] And it's not in any way to try and single out ourselves as a denomination or as a church, that somehow or other we're just superior to all other churches, and that's not what we're at. But you know very well that there are denominations that have publicly declared and taken decisions that are contrary to the Bible, because the spirit of the world and the thinking of the world has come to actually take the place of obedience to Christ.

our following at a distance. And we must never let that happen. We owe our allegiance to him.

We believe this Bible to be his word, to be the word of God. We're not in a position where we can just manipulate this Bible and how we understand it just to keep up with the thinking of the world and the developments in our society, whether it be atheism or secularism or whatever else it might be that leads to all kinds of relationships, all kinds of attitudes that are actually currently upheld and

promoted in our world.

Once the church comes to actually promote and to elevate these things, you've left the anchorage point of scripture, of the word of God.

And if you're following Christ at all, it's at a great distance and you're only hearing his voice faintly. And we can see in Peter's experience the danger of that.

[17:21] So there's his decline. He's at a distance from Christ. He's siding with the world. As Christians, you want to be true to Jesus.

You can't cut yourself off from the world altogether. You mustn't cut yourself off from the world altogether. We are servants of Christ. We owe it to Jesus to go to the world with the gospel, to interact with the world in a way that presents his truth, to build up relationships with people who are maybe not presently church people at all.

You don't just cut them off. You don't just say they're not believers. I don't want to have anything to do with them. But you don't take up worldliness just to get alongside them.

Because the spirit of worldliness is the spirit of being contrary to the standard of Jesus. It's being at a distance from Christ. God's God's love.

So we have to maintain our closeness to Jesus. We have to maintain that very clear distinction between our interaction with the world and our becoming worldly and our taking up the ways of the world.

[18:44] Secondly, let's look at the denial itself. A servant girl came seeing him as he sat in the light looking at him. This man was also with him, but he denied. A little later someone else saw him.

You also were one of them. Peter said, man, I'm not. And after an interval of about an hour, still another persisted. Certainly this man was also with him, for he's a Galilean. But Peter said, man, I do not know what you're talking about.

The other gospel tells us, writers tell us that he uttered this with oaths. He really wasn't even using proper language as he denied being a disciple of Christ.

Now it appears that when you compare all the gospels that there were more than just two or three people challenging Peter as to his relationship to Jesus. It's probably the case that they only record for us the one or two that you find in the gospel, but many people would have been joining in to ask Peter these questions and to challenge him too, that he was a disciple.

And that's the first thing you see in this denial of Jesus. It's the world's challenge. And you're not surprised that he meets with the world's challenge, because Peter knows he shouldn't really have been sitting in the middle of this worldly group anyway.

[20:08] And these worldly people know that Peter doesn't belong there. And that's how it is with us as Christians too. When we take up, if we do, and we mustn't ever take up the ways of the world and decline to that extent, the world will know that you don't belong there as a Christian.

And they will challenge you as to what you're doing there. Why are you taking up this practice or this attitude which is contrary to the Bible? And you know the world's challenges, this is really in Peter's study, as we'll see, in studying his life, this is in Peter's experience, really a continuation of what you read in verse 31.

Behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith does not fail. Satan's strategy, you see, is still active.

Satan's plan is still being worked out, Satan's purpose is still being pursued, by Satan himself through Peter. And what Satan is still set upon is that this man is going to fail.

And because this man is going to fail, then he'll get in amongst the other disciples and he'll cause havoc. And of course we saw last time that that would certainly be the case had it not been the fact that God, that Jesus had already prayed for him and he was in the keeping of God.

[21:31] But nevertheless, he doesn't belong there. And he's challenged us as what he's doing there. And so it will be for you and for me too.

And then you see his collapse. You see, he's now weak, he's vulnerable, he's open, his self-confidence.

Instead of depending on Christ and on his word, his self-confidence and his lack of prayer has led to this denial. And it's a very definite and a very clear and a very open denial.

As you can see, similarly in Mark's gospel. And that doesn't mean that my denial and your denial of the Lord is the same in kind as Peter's was.

I can deny the Lord tonight in my heart unseen to anyone else. I can be untrue to Jesus in my thoughts of other people.

[22 : 45] I can be untrue to him, I can deny him in whatever I fail to do in my relationship with him. Our denial is not always open.

our denial can be a very secret inward denial in our souls. But he denied him because he was so weakened through his decline that even in the face of a young woman, a servant girl, he couldn't actually even then say, yes, I'm one of his.

He denied it saying, I do not know him. I do not know him. That's not a surprise because it's come about as the end of this process of decline.

But then you see his distress, and as we come to his distress, we'll come to a much more positive thing in regard to the way the Lord is going to deal with Peter, the way Peter's going to be led to recovery and the wonder of Jesus as he deals with this man even at the point of his denial.

And the first thing you notice there, after the denials had taken place, immediately while he was still speaking, the cock crowed, and the Lord turned and looked at Peter.

[24 : 20] What kind of look was that? what did Peter see in the look of his Lord? Well, it wasn't a look that said, Peter, I don't want to know anything more about you.

It wasn't a look that said to Peter, Peter, now that you've done such a thing, you can no longer be my disciple. You know that from the remainder of the history of Peter as it's recorded.

And as we'll see, God willing, more fully next time, in Christ's restoration of him. Lord looks at Peter. It brings to Peter's mind the saying of the Lord.

And what he does is he then goes out and he weeps bitterly. He's come to realize what he has done and what has led to it. Now, the looks of Jesus in Scripture are always significant.

You go to chapter 19 and you see in the conversion of Zacchaeus, who had run, being a very small, very small man. He ran and climbed up into a sycamore tree, as you know.

[25 : 28] And as Jesus was passing that way, Jesus stopped right there at that point. And before he spoke to Zacchaeus, he looked up at him.

And he said to him, Zacchaeus, come down. Jesus didn't address him and looking down to the ground or looking around him. He looked straight at him in the eye and said, Zacchaeus, you, Zacchaeus, today, I must stay in your house.

Come down from there. Tonight, Jesus is looking into your heart and into mine. And you and I have to come to know that.

It's a wonderful thing. You don't have to know yourself perfectly and completely in order to come to know Christ as your Savior.

Savior. He himself knows you perfectly. You don't need to tell him everything about yourself because you don't know everything about yourself.

[26 : 30] But as Jesus looks in on your life and mine, that look of Jesus really gets through to our conscience. When you realize that he's looking at me, he's looking at what I'm like.

He's looking at who I am. He's looking at what I am in relation to him. He's looking at what I need. He's looking at what I've done, what I'm doing.

It's a look of examining and of probing. A look which conveys a message to us. As it did to Peter, as the Lord turned and looked specifically at Peter.

Peter, as he looked at the Lord, looking at him, was instantly aware of the fact, he knows what I've done. He's looking in upon my denial.

He's looking at my heart. And he goes out and he weeps bitterly. Because you see this, yes, it's an accusing look.

[27 : 44] And I'm sure Peter from it saw that there was a measure of condemnation in it, something that Jesus had every right to actually include in this look towards him. But it's a correcting look as well.

It's a look that leads or led to his correction, to his recovery from this lapse. And remember, we're looking at Peter's life in relation to Jesus, and so often we've seen in these studies that what you come to look at more than anything else is Jesus himself and what Christ is like and what he does, even with someone in this situation like Peter.

It's no less than a look of intense love and intense concern on the part of the Lord to this fallen disciple.

And doesn't that really comfort your heart tonight that in all our lapses, our sins, our failures, small or great, Christ assures us by his look, I know all about it, don't worry about it, bring it to me, I can deal with it.

It's a correcting look. And it leads to Peter going out and weeping bitterly. You see, he went out. Because when you come to know your sin and when you come to know Jesus looking into your soul and when you come to realize what has happened and what is the case between yourself and the Lord and the gravity of your sin and the seriousness of sin and that you cannot treat it lightly and that Jesus himself is God's answer to it, you need time with yourself.

[29 : 35] and to take time to be by yourself with Jesus. He went out, he left the company. Sin cannot be properly dealt with, adequately dealt with if other people are crowding in on you and distracting you from what needs to be done.

You need to be by yourself, you need to go to the Lord, you need to have it out with him, you need to seek his approval and his forgiveness. You go out, you leave the company, you deal with it person to person.

And the great thing about Jesus is that's exactly what he wants you to do. That's what the gospel message is, come to me and I will give you rest.

And he weeps bitterly. he remembered the word of the Lord that he had said before the cock crows today you will deny me three times. And that's what led to him going out and weeping bitterly.

The words originally, really literally we could translate them, he burst into tears. I wonder actually if he remembered back to his first meeting or interview with the Lord as we saw at the beginning of our studies in John chapter 1 and at verse 42.

[30 : 58] because interestingly in verse 42 of the gospel of John after Andrew Simon's brother had brought him to Jesus and said we found the Messiah which means the Christ he brought him to Jesus what do you then read?

Jesus looked at him. Before he said anything he looked at him and he said so you are Simon the son of John you shall be called Kephias which means Peter or a stone because it really meant that Peter was going to have a certain solidity about him a certain robustness about him but now you see in this situation that he's denied the Lord if it is the case as it could well be that he remembered not just this word of the Lord that he would deny him but this word the Lord had spoken to him did he actually think of that first look that Jesus had actually directed towards him when he came to know him first and now is he saying well I'm not a rock am I I've collapsed I'm not Kephias I'm Simon I've failed but I think the reason he burst into tears as much as anything else is that suddenly he realized he had wounded his best friend he had wounded his best friend that's where we need to see our sin as well not in theological definitions of it that's fine not in people explaining to us even in pulpits what sin is about what my sin is what your sin is put your sin tonight and I must do this with you put your sin tonight against the pure light of the love of Jesus that's where you see its ugliness and your need of being washed and the wonder of

Christ's grace that's ready to do that for you again and again and again you see it's when you see your sin against the light of God's love God's kindness God's patience Christ's compassion that's what breaks your heart much more so than though it is essential to know the law of God and essential to preach the law of God as something that highlights our sin because our sin is a transgression of his law or a failure to match the standard of his law yes of course it is and we mustn't neglect that but really more than anything else what will break your heart and break my heart is to realize as Peter realized I have sinned but I've sinned against my best friend I've sinned against the highest love there is I've sinned against immeasurable kindness as God through Nathan revealed to

David in 2 Samuel chapter 12 he didn't just say to Samuel through Samuel to David what you've done is terrible you've organized the death of Uriah so that you could take his wife to be your wife of course he said that to him but what he said also was this I gave you all of these things and he then lists them including wives I gave you this and I gave you that and I would have given you much more besides in other words the Lord was actually laying upon David's heart the sheer abundance of his grace that he had come to experience the sheer volume of gifts that he had bestowed upon David and through that God is really saying pretty much to David how could you have done this against all that I have shown to you and yes that's what broke David's heart too because the outcome of that realization is the wonderful prayer of

Psalm 51 where he asks the Lord to blot out his transgressions where he comes to confess Lord against you and you only I have sinned I have done it Lord and I've done it against you it broke his heart and it will break your heart and mine too I hope it will for myself I hope it's done that already I hope it's done that for you and if not I hope it will yet do it that when you realize something of the love of Christ in the gospel and realize that our sin is actually sin against that but we hear Jesus saying to us and see Jesus looking on us and saying well look how could you have done it against such love and yet

[36 : 30] I'm here I'm here to forgive you John Newton is well known for being the writer of Amazing Grace but he wrote many other hymns and passages and articles as well and one of those that he wrote is called The Cross and we can finish with his words in this poem or hymn The Cross You know yourselves what kind of background as a slave owner and slave ship captain leading such a debauched lifestyle that John Newton had before his conversion this is what he says in evil long I took delight unawed by shame or fear till a new object struck my sight and stopped my wild career I saw one hanging on a tree in agonies and blood he fixed his languid eyes on me as near his cross

I stood sure never till my latest breath shall I forget that look it seemed to charge me with his death though not a word he spoke a second look he gave which said I freely all forgive this blood is for thy ransom paid I die that thou mayest live thus while his death my sin displays in all its blackest hue such is the mystery of grace it seals my pardon too amazing grace of Christ let's pray Lord our gracious God how we thank you that that grace awaits us every day we waken and open our eyes in this world Lord help us we pray to avail ourselves of all the provisions of your grace enable us especially against our failure and sin to realize all that you have done for sinners so that we may say that you did it for us too we pray tonight that we may learn from what your word tells us of this disciple and especially that we will learn of how to walk closely with God and how to come when we have failed to seek your forgiveness that you are so ready to bestow bless to us your word we pray and all for

Jesus sake amen now we'll conclude our service this evening singing in psalm 130 that's from the scottish version psalter version psalm 130 page 421 the tune is martyrdom page 421 Lord from the depths to thee I cried my voice Lord do thou hear we'll sing the whole of the psalm on page 421 to the tune martyrdom Lord from the depths to thee I cried Lord from the depths to thee I cried my voice Lord do thou hear through onda myself Blue projects Lord

MARY ■ mog ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ksi ■ ■ ■ ■ Ke punched C ■ Just love iniquity, again with thee, forgiveness is the fear thou mayest be.

I wait for God, my soul not wait, my hope is in His word.

[41 : 14] For the day that our morning watch, my soul is part of the Lord.

I sing, Lord, I may not do all the morning light to see.

Let Israel open the door, for within mercy's feet.

And then Jesus' redemption is ever come with Him.

And from all His frequencies, He is blessed to be.

[42 : 45] Amen.