

Following Jesus (5) - Following At a Distance

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[0 : 00] Psalm number 40, that's on page 259. I waited for the Lord my God, and patiently did bear, at length to me he did incline my voice and cry to hear.

He took me from a fearful pit and from the miry clay, and on a rock he set my feet, establishing my way. He put a new song in my mouth, our God to magnify, many shall see it and shall fear, and on the Lord rely.

We'll sing on to the end of that double verse 5, in order none can reckon them to thee, if them declare and speak of them I would, they more than can be numbered are.

These verses in Psalm 40 we stand to sing. This is for the Lord my God, and patiently did bear, and left to me he did incline my voice and cry to hear.

He took me from a fearful pit, and found the mighty plain, and on a rock he set my feet.

[1 : 53] He took me from a fearful pit, and he did incline my way. He took me from a fearful pit, and he did incline my way. He put a new song in my mouth, our God to magnify, many shall see it and shall fear.

And on the Lord rely. And on the Lord rely. blood of the Lord rely. 5 Verse 6 I.

He **■ ■■■■**ge His death He nor such as turn aside to rise.

O Lord my God, O many are, the wonders thou hast done.

Thy gracious thoughts to us were far, above all thoughts are gone.

[3 : 50] Take other men, and wake on them, to thee in them declare, and speak of them, I would be more, and landing number down.

Let's call upon the Lord now in prayer. We'll join together and call upon God.

O Lord, our gracious God, once again we give thanks that we are able to gather here in this way as worshipers of your great and holy name.

We thank you, Lord, for the privilege of being together and for the way that you enable us to gather here in this place of worship. Lord, we know it is our great privilege to be able to call upon your name and sing your praises, to hear your voice speaking to us through the scriptures, and to wait for your Holy Spirit to apply your word to us.

We give thanks, O Lord, as we have sung in this psalm of praise, for the many benefits that we receive from you daily, even hour by hour. Your remembrance of us, Lord, continues, despite the fact that we are so unworthy of the least of your mercies.

[5 : 29] And your remembrance of us is especially precious to us. At times, O Lord, when we know the need of your support, of your strengthening in our weakness, of the way in which your word promises us that you will always be the portion of your people, that you will always be their companion through life as they come to trust in you.

O Lord, increase our faith, we pray, as the disciples long ago sought of you after they had seen something of your greatness and your power and might.

We pray, O Lord, out of our own weakness and many times out of our distress in this world, that you would come and show to us your power and uphold us and comfort us and quicken us inwardly on our path through life.

O Lord, O Lord, our God, we know that in the world in which we live, there is so much trouble, so much violence and death, so much anguish in the hearts of so many millions of people.

And even in our own locality, Lord, we know too that there is so much suffering, so much in the way of need and debt and poverty and deprivation.

[6 : 48] Lord, we ask today that you would be pleased to draw near to all such who are suffering, whatever form their suffering might take. We bless you that we can bring ourselves and others into your presence, knowing that you are the God who understands suffering.

For you came into this world to be the man of sorrows, acquainted with our grief. And you came to experience in family life what it is to face bereavement and sorrow and danger and trial.

We thank you, Lord, that your word encourages us today to take all our concerns into your presence, knowing that you are such a great God and Savior to your people. We do pray today, Lord, for those who are particularly caught up in difficulties and troubles and challenges in life.

Remember those, Lord, for whom this time of year is difficult. As we approach another year's end, as they recollect those people who are no longer with them.

Remember them, Lord, we pray. Some going back many years, and yet wounds are still open, O Lord, when we know of loved ones taken away.

[8 : 03] We pray that today you would be a God of comfort to them, and that you would be pleased to draw near to them and draw them near to you. We thank you, Lord, for whom this time of year is the Lord.

For we know that when one member of your body suffers, the others suffer with it. And we give thanks today, Lord, that we have that sense of fellowship and fellow-feeling one with another. That we are able to share both in the joys and in the sorrows of life. That we are able to bring all of these into your presence as we come ourselves before you.

Lord, our God, we pray that when two of our elders have been taken away in the past week, we pray that you would bless us, O Lord, with others raised up by you to take that place.

We pray that we may be thankful, Lord, for the provision that you made in giving us such men of such caliber. We pray that as we seek that they be replaced, that we would look to ourselves, realize that you are calling to us as well, not only in regard to the end of our course in this world, but also as to how much we can do for your cause, and how much we can contribute by your grace and by your provision to the furtherance of your kingdom.

[9 : 50] Lord, remember every other family in this congregation today, and there are many here, O Lord, present today, who have lost loved ones recently or in time gone by, and we commend them to you today and ask for your comfort, ask for your guidance for them.

Remember us, Lord, as a people in the island. Remember us in these difficult times of COVID pandemic, and when we find a further increase and another variant brought before us, Lord, in the news.

We pray that you would continue to protect lives, that you would continue to give us, O Lord, to take every step that is wise and necessary for us, not only to have our own lives protected, but also that of others too.

We pray that you would give, again, wisdom to those who are in charge of these proceedings for us as a nation, and indeed, Lord, throughout the world. We pray that we may look to you and that all may be turned to you, O Lord.

We long to see people coming to turn to the Lord, even through the impact of such a wide-ranging pandemic as this. Yet we know, Lord, that even such grievous providences do not of themselves change our hearts.

[11 : 09] But we know that you can, and we know that you can use such events to bring people to know you, to bring a concern over eternal issues. And we ask that you would bless them, and bless this to us, we pray.

Again, we commit to you those who lead us as a nation, and we ask that you would bless them in government, and those who help them, and those who give them counsel. So we pray that you would be pleased to bless them today and every day, that they have such responsibilities laid upon them.

Grant to them, Lord, that they may learn to look to you, and that they may realize you have given us the resources of your word to guide us individually and collectively, so that we may know your will, and that we may do what is right in your presence.

Be with those today who are ill. Be with those especially who are seriously ill. We commend them to you, and ask that you would bless them and their families. Where it is pleasing to you, Lord, we pray that you would restore to measures of health and of strength those who are ill at this time, those who have gone through surgery, those who are receiving treatment.

Bless these things to them, Lord, we pray, and make them effective. We ask that you bless those who have issues of mental health, who are ill, O Lord, in these regards as well.

[12 : 29] Bless them, Lord, we pray today, whether they be at home or elsewhere, we commit them to you as the God who knows us, and knows our frame, and knows what we are mentally and

spiritually and physically.

For you created us in the beginning. You formed us. You united all the parts of our being, spiritually and physically, together.

And you know each and every aspect of our being from moment to moment. And so, Lord, we commend them to you as well, and ask today that you would be gracious to them and to all our loved ones.

We pray that you would continue with us now and bless us throughout this service and through this day. Remember our young ones, our children, those here today, those at home. We ask that you'd bless and protect them, Lord, at this time.

We pray that all that they receive of teaching in your word at home, in Sunday school and in tweenies or even in creche, that you'd bless that. Bless the young adults of the congregation.

[13:33] Be pleased to draw near to them. We ask that your blessing will be with those in the Gaelic service this morning, and praying that you would bless that service too. And all the gatherings of your people, not only here locally, but throughout the whole world, O Lord.

We pray today for your blessing, for your presence amongst your people, for your empowering of your people and your quickening. That we might be living letters read by all around us, that we may give forth the light of Jesus Christ to that world in its darkness.

So be with us now. Hear us in our prayer and cleanse us from sin. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, children, it's good to see you present here today.

I know there's some online as well. It's always great to see and to hear children present in the congregation and the services. It's very difficult nowadays to get lost when you're traveling in a car. Because most cars, if not all cars nowadays, will have sat-nav in them. And sat-nav, although it's not always absolutely assured of keeping you in the right direction, depends what you put into it.

[14:47] But by and large, it's very difficult to get lost nowadays on the road. And they're still available, of course, maps as well that map out the roads. Throughout the country, if you want to follow that, if you don't have sat-nav, you've still got that map to refer to.

And because of that, we learn from the Bible that there are also ways in which our lives are directed spiritually. Jesus, at one time, was speaking about his departure.

And that was in John chapter 14. He spoke there to the disciples about that he was going away and that he would return again and bring them back to himself.

And you remember that he was asked a question there when Philip said to him, We don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way? And Jesus said to him, it was Thomas who said to him, Lord, we do not know where you're going.

How can we know the way? Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life. And Philip said to him, Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us. Now, Jesus was saying there, I am the way, and I'm the truth, and I'm the life.

[16:01] There are many, many things in this life that can confuse us, that can actually hide the way from us that is in Jesus. Things that happen in the world, things that happen in our own lives, even as young people.

Things that cause us many questions, maybe even pain and sorrow and bewilderment. But one thing never changes. This way never changes.

Sometimes, even in a sat-nav in your car, you can still end up with a bit of a problem. So remember, unless you keep your sat-nav up to date, you can download stuff from the internet that keeps your sat-nav up to date with any changes that have taken place in the road.

I remember after the Queen's Ferry Crossing was opened, going down to Edinburgh with the car, and I hadn't updated the sat-nav. In fact, I still haven't. But as we came to the new crossing, all of a sudden, looking at the sat-nav, it seemed that we were just in the middle of the sea, because it didn't pick up the road.

It hadn't been programmed to pick up the road. But this never happens, of course, with Jesus as the way and the truth and the life. Whatever things happen in your life or in my life, this always remains the same.

[17:20] You always have this main road that leads to heaven, and it's bound to lead to heaven. You're sure to get to heaven through Jesus as the way. And however much the devil might tempt you to leave that way and to go on to other sorts of ways that people might suggest, instead of being a Christian, instead of following Jesus, don't be ever tempted to do that, because he is always

the way and the truth and the life.

And as you find that from day to day, Jesus will guide us through all the things that we come across in this life. And he will do that safely.

We will come through safely with Jesus, even if it means at times there will be difficulties and trials and things that we really find a struggle with in this life.

He is the way and he's the truth and the life. Today in our sermon, we're going to be looking at following Jesus, but following at a distance. Something that happened in the life of the disciple Peter.

We're going to see in that sermon what happens when we leave the way, or when we just stop following Jesus properly. We get into trouble then, and we could even end up going away from Jesus altogether.

[18:37] And that, of course, is something none of us ever wants to do. So we have to look after our relationship with Jesus every single day and make sure that we're following him as the way that he is in himself that leads us safely on to heaven.

So we're going to say the Lord's Prayer. Now let's pray the Lord's Prayer together. Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. I'm going to read now from God's Word, and our reading is in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 22.

Luke, chapter 22, and our reading is verses 47. to 62. So Luke, chapter 22, beginning at verse 47.

[19:54] While he was still speaking, there came a crowd, and a man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss him. But Jesus said to him, Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?

And when those who were around him saw what would follow, they said, Lord, shall we strike with the sword? And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear.

But Jesus said, no more of this. And he touched his ear and healed him. And Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders who had come out against him, Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs?

When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness. Then they seized him, and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house.

And Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard, and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light, and looking closely at him, said, This man also was with him.

[21:09] But he denied it, saying, Woman, I do not know him. And a little later, someone else saw him, and said, You also are one of them. But Peter said, Man, I am not.

And after an interval of about an hour, still another insisted, Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean. But Peter said, Man, I do not know what you are talking about.

And immediately, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, Before the cock crows today, You will deny me three times.

And he went out, and wept bitterly. May the Lord bless that reading of his word to us. And we're turning now to look at words we find in this passage.

Especially, I want to draw your mind to verse 54, where you find at the end of verse 54, a reference there to Peter. Peter was following at a distance.

[22:15] So we're continuing with this study of different ways in which following Jesus is mentioned in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. And various aspects of following Jesus, we've looked at two or three of those already.

And the title of today's study really is following the words of the text itself. Following at a distance. Peter was following at a distance.

And we're going to see something of what that entailed, what was involved in following at a distance, and also what it led to, especially the denial of Jesus by Peter, that following at a distance led to.

And we'll finish off by looking also thirdly at the way that Jesus dealt with that, and how Peter came from that to weep bitterly.

And that was the beginning of his turning back to the Lord to follow him in the way that he ought.

Now, this denial of Jesus by Peter wasn't something that just happened all of a sudden.

[23 : 21] Denials of Jesus and lapses like that don't usually just happen all of a sudden. There's almost always something leading up to that, something of a pattern, something of a process spiritually, that actually then leads to this type of thing.

And you'll see that that was certainly the case with Peter. So I want to look at three points particularly. From this, from the passage mostly, under that heading of following at a distance.

First of all, you have distance from Jesus, the obvious reference there in verse 54. And then secondly, as we've said, you've got denial of Jesus on the part of Peter.

But thirdly, you have detection by Jesus. Because Jesus turned and looked upon Peter very intently, very deliberately. And that was him detecting the situation or letting Peter know, I know what's happening, Peter.

My eye is upon you. And that was very precious, as it turned out, for Peter himself. So first of all, at distance from Jesus, he was following at a distance.

[24 : 29] I think these words are interesting, not just because it describes something obvious geographically or in terms of literal distance. Peter was certainly, in terms of literal distance, following Jesus.

He wasn't near to Jesus, or he wasn't close to what was happening. He was following, but he was following at a distance. But the words really, I think, bring in the state of mind, the state of soul that Peter was in at that particular moment.

He was following Jesus at a distance spiritually, as well as literally. And his spiritual condition really is described in these, we can use these words to describe his spiritual condition.

He was following at a distance. And it's something that happened quite a while before this, or began quite a while before this. Let me just refer to a number of texts that will really prove this for us.

We can turn back to the previous gospel, the gospel of Mark, and in Mark's gospel, chapter 14, and at verse 27 through to 31.

[25 : 36] You've got these words in verse 27. Jesus said, You will all fall away, for it is written, I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.

But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee. Peter said to him, Even though they all fall away, I will not. And Jesus said to him, Truly I tell you, this very night before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.

But he said emphatically, If I must die with you, I will not deny you. And they all said the same. And of course in Luke chapter 22, you find in verse 31, that Jesus is saying there, Simon, Simon, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you all like wheat, but I've prayed for you.

And when you've turned again, strengthen your brothers. Peter said to him, Lord, I'm ready to go with you, both to prison and to death. Jesus said before, I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day till you deny me three times.

So you can see from these passages, Peter is not in a good condition. Peter is self-confident. Peter is sure that he himself is not going to do the kind of thing that Jesus is setting out before him there.

[26 : 59] And he's really taken up with his own ability. He's taken up with what he thinks is his own strength, with his own ability. And he's sure on that basis that even of all the rest, we're going to deny Jesus and turn away.

I'm not going to do this. If I have to die with you, Lord, then I'll go through with that. I will do it. And here he is in the passage before us, in Luke 22, in the denial.

And three times when he's challenged, he denies that he knows or is related spiritually to Jesus as a disciple. Now that's really the character, you might say, or the characteristics of decline, of spiritual decline.

I don't know how close you are to the Lord today or even how far you might be from the Lord today. But these verses really set out for us. This process that you see in the life of Peter, in the experience of Peter, they really set out for us what is characteristic of decline.

Peter has not given up following Jesus, but his heart is not in it. He's following at a distance. He's not near to Jesus. He's not near enough to Jesus.

[28 : 10] He's not close enough to Jesus. He's not maintained what Jesus had actually asked him to do. That was to actually watch and pray that he would not enter into temptation.

He's not done that. He's neglected to hear the voice of Jesus, to act upon the voice of Jesus, to do what Jesus had actually set before him by way of warning indeed.

He's still relying on what he considers as his own strength that's sufficient to deal with the issues that will come before him. How close today am I to Jesus?

That's the question you and I should be asking of ourselves. Are you keeping up your relationship with Jesus in a way that maintains close fellowship with him, that receives daily strength from him? Are you following Jesus like Peter, but yet at a distance? Let me ask you, is your heart, I ask myself, is my heart, is your heart really in your following?

[29 : 12] Are you there with conviction? Are you there with a delight in being close to Jesus, in following Jesus? Because you're a man who really is a warning to us.

Although the outcome turned out to be that Jesus knew this and he was restored by Jesus, as we see in John chapter 21, we must never, it's a very, very, very dangerous thing for us to presume that because that happened to Peter, it will happen inevitably to us even if we go astray a bit. It's a hugely dangerous conclusion to come to, especially if we are in a situation of spiritual decline, to actually presume that somehow it will work out all right and Jesus won't abandon us and he'll take us back into his way.

Remember, there were many people that were disciples in John chapter 6 who came to a point in their life when that was it. Sadly, they walked no more with him. They turned away from him, didn't come back.

And here is Peter as a lesson to us as well. He is following Jesus, but he's doing so at a distance. And the Lord is saying to me and to you through that, don't be satisfied with being at a distance from Jesus.

[30 : 28] Even if you can, as it were, spiritually see him in front of you and still in a measure or in a formality sort of way keep following him. That's really not what discipleship, what following is about.

Take a lesson from Peter today. If your heart has gone cold, if you've put a distance for some reason between yourself and Jesus, or even if you've never yet actually come close enough to him to take him to be your savior, take these words to heart.

He was following at a distance. There's a wonderful passage in the Song of Solomon, which isn't by any means the easiest in the Bible to interpret. But if we take it in terms of the beloved and the one that she's in love with, the one who is beloved by the prince or whatever we make of him, and also the woman herself in the Song of Solomon.

You remember there in chapter 5 of Song of Solomon that you have an incident where she describes herself in this way. I slept, but my heart was awake.

Maybe you know what something, or I know something of what that's about. And if you translate that into spiritual language, it means that we can sometimes have a kind of semi-consciousness about our Christianity.

[31 : 55] We can be following Jesus at a distance. We can hear his voice there, but we're not really at that moment in a condition to respond properly or in the way we used to, on the way we would like to, to that voice.

What is what she said? I sleep, or I slept, but my heart was awake. A sound. My beloved is knocking. Open to me. My sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one.

For my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night. There is the appeal from her beloved. And the appeal is coming to her. She's gone to rest for the night.

She's closed the door. Everything's locked up. But it's the voice of her beloved. And she would normally respond to the voice of her beloved, jumping to her feet and opening the door to him and welcoming him.

But she's drowsy. She's gone to bed. Her heart is awake. She's hearing his voice. And he's appealing to her to open the door. And this is what she says. I have put off my garment.

[32 : 52] How can I put it back on? I've bathed my feet. How can I soil them? My beloved put in his hand to the latch and my heart was thrilled with him.

He didn't just stand at the door and he's not just been there for a long time. He has been. His appeal has come to her. Now he's rattling the latch, as it were, just to see if that finally will rouse her. And then she said, I rose and I opened.

I rose to open to my beloved. But my beloved had turned and had gone. And she had to go out again to search him in the streets of the city.

You don't want that to be true of you and I spiritually. Today, if you're hearing the voice of Jesus, don't be content with that as a mere echo in your soul.

Don't be content with that if you're just hearing it from a distance. If you've not yet come to know the Lord and to take him as he's offered in the gospel, here is Jesus giving you this renewed opportunity.

[33 : 54] Because as you're hearing his voice, don't harden your heart. As Psalm 95 puts, today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your heart. And if you are here today and you've let a distance come between you and the Lord.

Because it's always something in which we're at fault, isn't it? When a distance comes between us and our Lord. We've not kept up our Bible reading. We've not been praying as regularly or as intently as we must and as we used to.

We've not really been keeping fellowship with fellow Christians. And really, this is one of the dangers of this terrible pandemic that's come upon us. It's one of those things that's affected us as a church greatly in terms of our fellowship and in terms of our desire to have fellowship one with another to support each other.

And that, of course, is fellowship physically that we've got today. I know you're watching online, but as I've said before, that really should be the exception. That really should be for those who simply cannot physically be present with other people in the church building to worship the Lord.

And so again, I would say, and I'm sure it's on the basis of Scripture that I'm saying this, don't neglect the forsaking of yourselves together as the custom of some is. If you cannot by any means be in church, we are wonderfully privileged to have the technology that's able to bring the gospel into your home.

[35 : 18] But again, if it's the case that you could be and should be here physically with God's people, then surely that's your great privilege rather than stay, as it were, at a distance from Jesus.

And if you are here present or even online and you've let something come between you and the Lord, if your relationship isn't as close as it used to be, if you're following at a distance, well, deal with that now.

Listen to his voice now. Because what we're going on to see is that Peter didn't listen. Peter didn't pray. He didn't get his life back on track.

And so it led, secondly, to his sitting with the world. Here is another aspect of his distance from Jesus. Here is Peter, you see, following at a distance when they'd kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard sat down together.

Peter sat down among them. And these words, sitting down among them, literally mean sitting right in the midst of them. And very often, that's what you find happening, isn't it?

[36 : 25] It often goes with letting a distance come between yourself and Jesus, you end up siding with or sitting with the world. Those who are mere onlookers or even opponents as they were here of Jesus and of what he was about.

But, friends, we are never spiritually neutral. We are never spiritually neutral.

If I am not today warming in my relationship with Jesus or keeping that relationship warm and close, then it's inevitable that I'm going to be getting colder and I'm going to be letting a bigger distance between myself and the Lord.

And that's true of you as well. We are never spiritually neutral. And the Bible brings these things to us and they're difficult to preach about because they're dealing with spiritual decline.

They're dealing with things that are in reality true but very actually difficult to accept or to present to a congregation or to accept of yourself or of myself that it's true.

[37 : 31] You know, but God has given us this today so that we will really take it to heart that we have to maintain our fellowship with Christ above all and keep close to Him as much as we can.

Because if we're getting cold in our relation to Jesus, then we're going to be warming in our relation with the world. And you know, that has to apply not just to individuals, it applies to churches as well. There's a church in the book of Revelation, a church called Laodicea, no church in Laodicea today. But when Jesus wrote through John to that church in Laodicea, this is what He said to her, I wish that you were hot or cold, but because you are lukewarm, I will spew you out of my mouth.

And here was a church who was saying, I'm actually okay. In fact, I'm very good. I've got all the things that I need. And God was saying, no, you're not.

You're not good at all. You've declined to the extent that you're just lukewarm. You have kind of following of me, but it's at a distance.

[38 : 51] And if you don't repent, I'm going to spew you out of my mouth. You see, that's what's said of a people. That's what's said of a congregation. That's what's said of a church. So we have to take these teachings of the Bible to heart, not just individually, as we're seeking to do today, but also as a congregation of God's people.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, I think it was, he said, I think it was actually about a theological institution, like a seminary or college. I don't know which one it was, but he said that every institution has the capacity to turn into the opposite of itself.

Every institution has the capacity to turn into the opposite of itself. What did he mean by that? He meant that unless we look after our spiritual condition, we're going to end up totally opposite or different to what we began with.

And if we actually let a distance between ourselves and the Lord and we don't deal with that and it becomes wider, we're going to find ourselves sitting with the world.

And we could find ourselves very easily dropping off altogether in our following of Jesus. And the same can be true of congregations.

[40 : 06] God's providence is something that we need to read as a book that he's given us. And the providence of such things as this pandemic is there for us to read clearly that God is speaking to us.

And in the light of his word, we can read his providence that's saying, don't let this put a distance between you and your Lord. Don't go back in your following of Jesus.

Don't relax. Don't think that your own strength is going to be sufficient for you. Don't think that because you're an experienced Christian, because you've been following and professing the Lord for many, many years as I have myself.

Though some of you are longer than that, obviously. But nevertheless, don't let that persuade us that somewhere because of that experience, because we're that far on in the journey, because we've been following Jesus for that long, that we're not anymore going to let a distance come between us.

The only way you can keep close to Christ is to appeal to him each day to draw you near to him, to guide you by his spirit, to bless his word to you, here is Peter following at a distance.

[41 : 23] And as we said, secondly, that led to his denial of Jesus. Following at a distance and then sitting with the world, he was, of course, here then challenged by the world. That's the beginning of his denial.

And now, Peter knows he doesn't belong there. Absolutely sure that Peter knew when he sat down there in the midst of those who were not related savingly to Jesus at all.

Peter knew very well in his heart of hearts, I shouldn't be here. This is not my place. But he had gone a distance from the Lord.

He hadn't prayed. He hadn't kept up his relationship. So as he sat down here and the challenge then came, this was the challenge three times. First of all, a servant girl, she came and looked at him closely and said, this man also was with him but he denied it, saying, woman, I do not know him.

And three times, of course, the challenge came and each time Peter denied that he knew the Lord or was related that way to him as a disciple. And when you look at these challenges, really what they amount to is, I think, pretty much this.

[42 : 34] She recognized him as a disciple and her words and the words of the others who challenged him were really amounting to this, we could say, what's leaving you here?

Why are you sitting here with us? What's leaving you in the midst of this gathering that we belong to? This is not your place. Now, the world is always going to challenge you.

The world is always going to find something negative to say about the Christian life. But let it never be said that the challenge of the world is a challenge to you or to me that recognizes we're out of place.

That recognizes we've stopped following to an extent that we're now following only from a distance. And that, of course, can actually happen to our people and to our congregation as well.

Go back to the Old Testament and in 1 Kings 8 and the parallel passage in Chronicles and it's also referred to elsewhere in the Prophets, you'll find a prediction of what was going to happen to the temple that Solomon had built and was there dedicating.

[43 : 51] And when the Lord appeared to Solomon then after the sacrifices had been given and dedicating the temple and so on, the Lord appeared and made great promises to Solomon and to the people but he also included with the promises these warnings.

If you turn away from my statutes and say of other gods this house will become a heap of ruins. Everyone passing by will be astonished and will hiss and will say why has the Lord done this to this land and to this house?

And then they will say because they abandoned the Lord their God who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt and laid hold on other gods and worshipped them and served them. Therefore the Lord has brought all this disaster upon them.

Now when you read that you might be saying in your mind and I might be saying well that was then and that was in those days and that was in the days of the apostles of Peter. Surely that's not going to happen in a place like Stornoway Free Church.

There is no church in Laodicea today. There is no church in many of these places where the Lord sent letters of greeting and of teaching to these Christians in the apostles' time.

[45 : 03] never say never. Never say never about spiritual decline. Never say never about stopping to follow Jesus.

Never say never in the way that Peter said it though everyone should do it I will not do it. Never say never as a congregation we must never say though other congregations will go to the wall and will cease to exist it will not happen to Stornoway it will happen to us if we stop following the Lord. It's as simple as that. If we let that distance become so great that really there's little life left in a congregation when that happens.

And now there's just a very sad sight before us Peter caving in to these challenges. What a difference to what he said in Mark 14 31 as we read even if I should die I will not forsake you I will not do it.

And that's why surely behind Peter's first epistle and what a wonderful what a wonderful change there is in 1 Peter to these sad verses that we're looking at today.

[46 : 23] And when Peter wrote his first epistle you can tell going through that epistle how much he drew from his experience of his own failures as well as of the many blessings he received from the Lord when he was with him prior to Jesus' departure.

I remember in 1 Peter chapter 3 you have these wonderful words and they really I think very very much lock on to the passage we're looking at today and the theme of following Jesus from a distance.

Because in 1 Peter chapter 3 and verse 14 this is what he's saying even if you should suffer for righteousness sake you will be blessed have no fear of them nor be troubled but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy or you could say the AV form of it in your hearts sanctify the Lord Christ in your heart always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

Why had Peter failed to give this girl and these others an answer when they came to challenge him a reason for the hope that was in them because he had not sanctified the Lord in his heart at that stage.

He had stopped doing that at least to an extent and when it came to the challenge he just crumbled. he wasn't in a fit spiritual condition to answer the challenge.

[47 : 54] You see where that's getting us. Following Jesus at a distance well it need not and I hope not it won't lead to a denial of Jesus on our part you or mine but it's likely it's by no means impossible and here is Peter looking back and saying I've learned from that I need to sanctify the Lord and I'm calling upon you that I'm writing to here in this letter sanctify the Lord Jesus don't be intimidated by the world as I was at one time you can just hear that in the back of his mind as he's writing can't you?

Sanctify the Lord Christ in your heart so as always then to be able to give an account of the hope that is in you may that be yours and my experience as well because thirdly you have thankfully in this passage detection by Jesus see the passage ends here where the Lord turned in verse 61 the Lord turned and looked at Peter and Peter remembered the saying of the Lord how he had said to

him before the cock crows today you will deny me three times and he went out and wept bitterly he turned and looked upon Peter now that's a very deliberate look on the part of the Lord that comes out even in the translation the Lord turned and looked upon Peter a deliberate action on Jesus part singling out Peter detecting what was wrong in Peter's life looking upon him with that look which was probing and examining and nevertheless conveying to him his need of redirection his need of correction and that's really what it led to what a marvelous Lord we have that he knows and recognizes and detects and diagnoses every turn of our hearts every thought of our minds that his mind is upon his people to the extent that when they do let a distance come between them and himself he knows that he turns and through the gospel he's saying to you and to me today don't let that happen and if you've let it happen deal with it close it up don't let it need to denial as I did myself and

Peter and Peter went out and wept bitterly he had to go out couldn't stay there any longer the Lord had touched his conscience the Lord's look had really stirred his soul and his conscience into action and he went out he needed to be by himself and that's how it is with you and with me as well we need each other's company we value each other's company we need each other's support we need mutual support we need to love one another we need to look after each other but when it comes to repenting no one can do it for you or for me you need to go out and take time to be with the Lord you need to just remember the Lord's look upon your life and into your conscience and you need to go out and you need to leave everything else and deal with that because that's the most important issue of the moment that you correct your relationship with Christ if it needs correction that you repent of the distance that's come between you if that's what's the case and he went out and wept bitterly he wept bitterly words really literally mean he burst into tears you can just hear almost Peter's mind clicking over turning over as he bursts into tears what is that really indicating well if he could put it into words it would be something like this I have just stabbed my best friend that's what he's thinking because that's what he had done he had done this to Jesus he had done this to his Lord to his Savior to his dear friend wept and you know if he could do it then it's quite possible for you and I to do it too but he wept out these sins of his soul in tears of repentance sins and if today you have a distance between you and Jesus weep it out go to him his eye is upon you and he understands and he knows from his own experience even in dealing with

Peter he knows what to do with you look up to him repent of that sin that's come between you and the Lord and if you haven't let that distance come between you and the Lord and there are many here today I'm sure of whom that's true that you have not let a distance come between you and the Lord but if you haven't then you still need to do and I need to do the same thing to keep looking to the Lord to bring to the Lord your relationship with himself and you can do that through prayer and you can do that as one person put it in words which became a well known hymn what a friend we have in Jesus written by a man who's on the eve of his wedding his fiancée sadly drowned and then eleven years later again he was engaged to be married and his fiancée contracted a disease and after a short illness she died as well and he wrote these words it appears actually for his mother's benefit when she was going through a very hard time and they were never intended to become noted publicly but of course it became a well known hymn of praise what a friend we have in Jesus all our sins and griefs to bear what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer oh what peace we often forfeit oh what needless pain we bear all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer have we trials and temptations is there trouble anywhere we should never be discouraged take it to the

[55 : 08] Lord in prayer can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share Jesus knows our every weakness take it to the Lord in prayer are we weak and heavy laden cumbered with a load of care his precious saviour still our refuge take it to the Lord in prayer do your friends despise forsake you take it to the Lord in prayer in his arms he'll take and shield you you will find a solace there may God bless his word to us Lord our God we thank you today the direction that your word brings to us the counsel it brings to us forgive us Lord we pray for any mishandling we have made of your word in speaking or in hearing help us we pray to apply it to our own relationship with you today and to our fellow human beings to

Lord to us to intervene in our experience if we have strayed from following after you closely help us to deal with everything that comes between us and yourself Lord if we find ourselves today still following but at a distance help us we pray by the power of your spirit to close that distance to hasten to be close to you and to come to appeal to you that you would maintain us Lord in the

integrity of our walk with you lest we too should come and deny you Lord we thank you for your remembrance of us every day and for your own willingness to come constantly to be by your side and help us to engage in prayer with you with the friend that we have in Jesus hear us for your namesake Amen let's now conclude by singing in

Psalm number 30 Psalm 30 in the same Psalms verses 4 to 8 that's on page 35 you holy ones sing to the Lord sing out with joyful voice when you recall his holy name then praise him and rejoice as anger but a moment lasts lifelong his favor stays though tears may last throughout the night joy comes with morning's rays I never shall be moved I said in my prosperity you made my mountain firm and strong when you Lord favored me but when you hid your face from me my heart was terrified to you O Lord I called aloud for mercy Lord I cried these four verses you holy ones sing to the Lord true make so when you recall this this holy name, embrace him and rejoice.

It's hand and hand, a moment last, like all his papers chase.

The tears fill us throughout the night, joy comes with morning's rays.

[59 : 32] I never shall be who I stand in my prosperity.

You live my mountain firm and strong, when you, Lord, give her deep.

But when you hear your case from me, my heart was terrified.

To you, O Lord, I call out.

For mercy, Lord, I cry. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore.

[60 : 59] Amen.