

People of the Passion: Peter

DAVE BAST

Have you ever denied knowing Jesus? Most of us probably have at one time or in one way or another; probably without even realizing it. That certainly was the case for Peter, the faithful follower of Jesus, who denied him, not once but three times. So, in what ways do we deny Jesus today; and is there any hope for those who do? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Okay, Peter's denial of Christ – that is the story we have come to today; and one of the things we try to do in *Groundwork* is show how the stories of the Bible are relevant to us. Well, that is not much of a stretch today when we think about Peter, is it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, as I was thinking about this story, my typical experience when I fly – I do a fair amount of flying for the ministry – you know, when I settle down in Economy, I typically slap on my headphones and I pull out my MP3 and put some classical music on, and... Well, first of all, I hope that I will have some empty seats around me, which seldom happens nowadays; but beyond that I am really hoping that the folks who sit around me kind of leave me alone. I really hate that question when they sit down and say: Well, let's talk a little bit; and what do you do?

DAVE BAST

Yes, what do you do; right.

BOB HEERSPINK

What is your work? And I struggle with an answer because I am so tempted most of the time just to say: Well, I am into media; and not say to them: I am a pastor who does religious online and radio programming.

DAVE BAST

I am a televangelist... how is that for a conversation stopper.

BOB HEERSPINK

I never use that phrase; but you know, I draw away sometimes from really saying exactly what I do because I will get strange looks or they will think I am a little loopy. They wonder whether I am going to give them an evangelistic sermon; and then I think to myself: Okay, have I really been up front in who I am as a Christian? I mean, here is an opportunity to share Jesus. Some people have great stories about bringing people to Christ on airplanes, and I am pulling back from that. I mean, I sometimes wonder whether at that moment I am suffering from something of a Peter syndrome.

DAVE BAST

It is funny, in our culture today, just to say you are a pastor can cause the average Joe or Jane serious discomfort; and I wonder what the dynamics are of that that are going on; but that is probably another tangent. For us, the dynamics are, we are kind of tempted, aren't we, to downplay that because maybe it is embarrassing?

BOB HEERSPINK

Uncomfortable as to where the conversation will go. You wonder whether people will think that – especially if you are into media – whether you are exploiting people financially, because that has happened in televangelist circles.

DAVE BAST

It is liable to raise either discomfort or ranging all the way to disgust; and maybe a false impression of who you really are, and you know: I am not a jerk. I am not this, I am not that. I am not a holy Joe. Yes, the dynamics of that situation... Well, the classic biblical example is Peter during the trial of Jesus. We have been exploring that story; maybe you know it. If you are familiar with the Bible, you certainly know what happened. Jesus is arrested on his last night on earth. He is taken before the chief priests and the Sanhedrin, where they examine him; and while that happens, Peter sort of follows at a distance, and then he is accosted in the courtyard to the priest's house. So, Jesus is inside undergoing this trial and Peter is outside. He doesn't dare quite get in there or go in and appear next to Jesus.

BOB HEERSPINK

But in a sense, he is going to undergo a trial, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. It is a double trial. Well, I will read the passage from Matthew 26:

⁶⁹Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. ⁷⁰But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you are talking about," he said. ⁷¹Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷²He denied it again with an oath. "I don't know the man." ⁷³After a while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them. Your accent gives you away." ⁷⁴Then he began to call down curses. He swore to them, "I don't know the Man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. ⁷⁵Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken. "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Peter is such an interesting character study. No one rises higher. Jesus identifies him as the rock when he makes his great confession about: You are the Messiah. You are the Son of the Living God. And no one falls lower. Jesus will even say: Get thee behind me, Satan, speaking to Peter, because Peter wants to convince him he really doesn't have to go to the cross.

DAVE BAST

Interesting you should bring that earlier thing up; you know, in Matthew 16 Peter makes this magnificent, sublime confession: You are the Christ, the Son of God; and in Matthew 26, he says in an escalating series of denials: NO, you're wrong. I don't know him. And then later, an oath, a curse, and finally calling down: Blankety, blankety, blank! I don't know that guy!

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and you know, this rollercoaster happened within a matter of hours, even minutes; because he has been out in Gethsemane being the rock. He has his sword out; he is swinging away. He is the great warrior defending Jesus; and now, moments later, he is denying, not only that he knows Jesus, but he is like you say, he is calling down curses. He is really rejecting even his relationship with God as he brings out these

invectives.

DAVE BAST

And then, something very interesting happens at the very end of the story: A rooster crows. In our terms, an alarm clock goes off because it is getting toward daylight and the rooster is out in the yard...recognize that? If you are from the farm, and in the days when there were roosters in the yard, that is what happens.

BOB HEERSPINK

But, you know, I think the Church has often acknowledged how we struggle with the Peter syndrome, because that actually is in some places the symbol that is placed on the steeple of the church.

DAVE BAST

Oh, yes. You see it, if you have ever traveled to Europe especially, like in the Netherlands or France or western European countries. Many times the churches won't have a cross on the steeple, they will have a rooster, which is very interesting, isn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

There is a museum in a city near us that has artifacts from the early Church, and in that museum there is this metal rooster that once was on top of the steeple... now unfortunately it has a few bullet holes in it because some country kids decided to use it for some potshots; but you know, the interesting thing is to say what is it doing there anyway? And it is really a reminder how we can become Peter. Looking to the Church, people would say: Well, there is the rooster. Am I confessing Christ or am I denying Christ?

DAVE BAST

That is a really interesting thought. Let's pursue that after a short break.
Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Along with Bob Heerspink, I am Dave Bast. So Bob, we ended with the story of Peter's denial and the rooster crowing and the symbolism of that; but you know, there is a context in which this story takes place, and I think we have to look back at what happened in the upper room as well, and then sort of ask some questions about how this could have happened.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; why did it happen? What is really the motivation of Peter?

DAVE BAST

Because in the upper room Jesus had warned Peter specifically: Before the rooster crows, you are going to deny me three times; and you would think, now that is just a few hours ago. In fact, Jesus said three things in the upper room, all of which came true. He said: One of you will betray me to his disciples; Judas did that. Peter, you are going to deny me; in fact, I think it is in Luke's Gospel where Jesus says: Satan has desired to sift you like wheat. So it was even more of a warning: Peter, watch out because the devil is going to grab you – not Judas only, but you, Peter. Satan is on your doorstep. And then he said: All of you will desert me. All three of those things happened; so the question is, how could Peter have turned around and done this very thing that he had been warned about?

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Peter is a guy who is so committed to Jesus at one level, and yet he really can't believe that Jesus is going the way of the cross. Yes, that was true when he made his great confession. I think that is part of the dynamic here. I don't think Peter really believes what Jesus says, because in the Garden when he pulls out his sword and he starts to swing away, he still thinks Jesus is the great warrior; and if his chief lieutenant, Peter, can come to his side, he will do the right thing; and I think it was stunning for Peter when Jesus not only said

to Peter: Put away the sword, but then he reaches out and he heals the man that Peter has just injured. It must have been like Peter is standing there saying: Jesus has just pulled the rug out of everything I am doing for him. Doesn't he see this? It is like Jesus said to him: Peter, you have got it all wrong.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he still doesn't get it. He didn't get it earlier with the great confession either. That is why Jesus had to rebuke him so severely.

BOB HEERSPINK

This is someone who thinks they are on God's side and suddenly getting whacked on the head and discovering they have been fighting *against* God all this way.

DAVE BAST

I have a real hunch that Peter might have thought he passed the test, that the test came in the Garden. It was a test of his courage. You know, are you willing to die with me? Because remember his boastfulness too; he was really over confident. Even if they all run away, Lord... you know, I will never leave you. I will die with you. And so here it comes and that took real courage, but Peter didn't lack physical courage. He was the one who got out of the boat in the storm and walked over the water to Jesus, at least initially. What he lacked was moral courage because he misunderstood the fact that the test hadn't even come yet.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; remember that Peter is still the disciple who is following after Jesus. I mean, it took a fair amount of courage just to put himself into that courtyard.

DAVE BAST

And as far as we know, he and John were the only ones who did that. The rest all went to ground. They went back and hid.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; so I mean, Peter is there, but I think Peter didn't understand that his real test was going to be right there with ordinary people in that courtyard scene. I mean, he may have thought: Well, maybe the Sanhedrin will call me in and then I can testify and really take a stand for Jesus; but the real test – the real trial of Peter – is going to happen out there in the courtyard; and I think that is what happens to us, too. We often deceive ourselves by saying: Boy, you know, if I had an opportunity to witness before kings, I would really say what I think about Jesus; but then you are sitting in the office and you have an opportunity to say something about your faith to a colleague and you let it go. The opportunity to do great things for God is really nurtured by doing those little everyday things that come along.

DAVE BAST

Yes, like when you are on a plane and somebody asks you, saying: Hey, I'm a pastor.

BOB HEERSPINK

What's it going to be?

DAVE BAST

I agree. Most of us probably play these little glory games in our own heads, you know: I could be a martyr. I would stand up. If they came for me, you know, and were going to throw me in prison, I would not deny Christ. Well, actually, I know some people in Iran where that has actually happened, and it isn't real glorious. Thankfully, many of them have stood for their faith, but it is no fun; but for us, the test is much more likely to come as it did for Peter. It is going to be our vanity. It is going to be our pride. It is going to be embarrassment that we might risk. It is going to be some little servant girl or the equivalent who catches us off guard even though we've been warned: If you think you stand, take heed lest you fall, the Apostle says. So, the enemy will attack us at our weak point, not necessarily our strength.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and Peter is just not prepared for this. He doesn't really think this is a possibility. So the opportunity presents itself, and he does the thing that is going to save his own skin. You know, it is interesting to see how the denials build. He starts out just by saying: I just don't know the man. I think that is very often where our denial starts. Let's not even talk about Jesus, right?

DAVE BAST

It's a personal thing.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly; and then as the pressure builds, his denials become more fierce.

DAVE BAST

Yes: Let me show you how I fit in. I can curse him like anybody; but what do you do? Okay, we are all capable of it. We all probably do it. What happens next? What happens if the rooster crows in our life? Let's go there after this next break.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink with Dave Bast. Dave, just before the break, we were talking about why Peter denied Jesus. What is the motivation, and what are the motivators in Peter's life that repeat in our own?

DAVE BAST

Or even maybe not motivation so much, because I don't think he chose to do this intentionally... it kind of snuck up on him. You get the feeling that it was over almost before he knew what was happening, you know. The words just kind of blurted out in that pressure situation. So the question is not really motivation, it is dynamics. How did it happen? How did he get caught so much by surprise?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, Peter is this over confident guy; and you know, I find in my own ministry through the years whenever I think I really have ministry cased, that is when God throws something into my ministry where I have to say I just don't know how to handle this. You know, as soon as you think you've got power in yourself to stand firm for Jesus, that is when you are setting yourself up; and Peter just keeps doing this again and again.

DAVE BAST

Take heed: If you think you are standing, take heed lest you fall. That is the biblical warning. Watch and pray, Jesus said, lest you enter into temptation. This whole sense of: There but for the grace of God go I; you know, the old story – the old line. I am capable of doing that. I don't have it cased. I don't have it all together. It could happen to me at any time. I could pretty much probably do anything; so I better not think I am better and I am stronger, and even though all those others will do that, Lord, I will never do that.

BOB HEERSPINK

And if you don't understand that it can happen to you, then you will never prepare, because I think so often opportunities, for example, to witness, come our way and there is kind of an open door, and so often as Christians we sit there debating whether or not we should say anything; and then the door just closes; and there is just this window that we don't seize. We don't deny Jesus verbally. It is really a sin of omission. We just don't speak.

DAVE BAST

Or we don't act, because that can be a witness, too, you know. We know... okay, I should do this; I should respond; I should...

BOB HEERSPINK

Here is an opportunity to help someone. The opportunity passes by and then we say: Well, it's gone, so...

DAVE BAST

Yes. Let's get to the rooster crow because I love that detail. I think it is so freighted with significance, and it has to do with Jesus' warning: Before the rooster crows, that is when you will deny me. And the Bible says: When the rooster crowed, Peter remembered the word that Jesus had spoken. So it kind of awakened his conscience again. It brought him to self awareness.

BOB HEERSPINK

The crow of the rooster was a gift of grace.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

There was grace in that it pulled Peter out of himself and brought his relationship to Jesus back into perspective. It is interesting how Luke's Gospel says: The rooster crowed – yes, he remembered the word of Jesus; but then Jesus was also there at that point in the courtyard, and he gave him a look; and the rooster crow is connected with... I think it just calls us to say Jesus is looking at me. What did he just think of me?

DAVE BAST

That idea that it is a moment of grace – that it comes from God to sort of call us to our senses: Look at what you've done. Look at where you are. Look at what you are doing. I think that happens in a lot of different ways, doesn't it, today, for us?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; it would be interesting to say: Okay, where and how does the rooster crow in our own lives as Christians?

DAVE BAST

Here is where I would love if we were live and had a call-in thing, where we could ask people: Have you ever heard the rooster crow? Did you ever have that experience? I mean, it can even happen in church, believe it or not. I remember when I was a senior in college I was engaged to be married, I was headed for seminary, and I messed up. I don't have to go into the details, but I was pretty well convinced I had ruined my life, and I happened one Sunday evening to go to church, which wasn't, in those days, so typical for me; but all by myself I went to a church in town, and the minister's sermon... this is one of those that you remember, you know, after so many years. Most of the sermons, including most of the ones I've preached, I have forgotten. The minister's sermon was entitled: God gives second chances; and he happened to be preaching about Paul and Mark, how Paul said at the end of his life: Bring Mark, I need him; even though he had failed before. I took that as a word from God to me. It was a rooster crow for me; and it kind of called me back and I got back on track.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, I was thinking about how does the rooster crow in our lives, and that can happen through a particular event, but I think to a great degree it happens when we as disciples put ourselves in the path of God's word, and we do that with worship. You know, sometimes we say: Church again? And devotions: Okay... open up the Bible, read the Bible... but it is in those moments, I think, that God does hit us over the head with something in scripture. I mean, I have opened up scripture and I have read a story I have read a hundred times before, and something will pop out at me that speaks into where I am at right now. I didn't see it before, but that is a rooster crow, and I think that is why Christians have to go back again and again into the Word, because that is one of the primary places where we are going to be pulled up short in terms of the way

we mess up in our discipleship.

DAVE BAST

Somebody says: You know, I just find myself struggling to believe. I don't know how to believe. What do I do? I can't seem to believe. And my response is: Go to church... keep going to church, you know; because eventually you will. That is how it happens – that is *where* it happens.

BOB HEERSPINK

I heard this story of a pastor who felt he was losing his faith, and he went to a friend who was a pastor, and the advice of this friend was, get back into the pulpit and preach to yourself.

DAVE BAST

That's good. People have been converted that way.

BOB HEERSPINK

And he said: I preached myself back into faith. I began to deliver messages, not just for those sitting in the pew, but for me.

DAVE BAST

So Peter hears the rooster crow and he responds. He goes out and weeps bitterly. There is a moving, gripping, memorable moment in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, where he sets this to music, and it is just this cascade of descending weeping notes on the word: He wept bitterly; and that was the beginning of his turnaround – of his restoration – his repentance; but I am wondering, what is the difference between Peter and Judas, because in a sense, Judas also felt bad. He tried to return the money. He said: I have sinned. What is the dynamic between those two very different ends?

BOB HEERSPINK

They are different ends, and I think one of the differences at least is the despair you see in Judas. To me, Judas wanted to solve the problem himself, and he didn't find any way out of that; and so in despair he hangs himself. The rest of the story for Peter takes place after the resurrection, where Jesus and Peter have this conversation together, where it is not really Peter finding a way to restore himself into Christ's good graces, it is really Christ saying: Come back into the circle and follow me. Judas really didn't look to Jesus, and Peter did.

DAVE BAST

I think if I could have been there and taken Judas by the collar, I would have said to him: Go to church. That is the difference. Go back to Jesus because no matter what you've done, no matter how badly you have denied him or betrayed him, I think if you turn back to him you will find what Peter found, and that is: Do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know I love you despite my weakness. Well, then, come.

BOB HEERSPINK

Peter struggled with who Jesus is, and at the end of the journey for him he got it. He went to the cross; he suffered and died for Peter's forgiveness; and I think that is the key. Peter understood what Jesus really did for him, and you know, the rest of the story that we could tell of his life is of great sacrifice, great ministry, and ultimately a martyr's death for the sake of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining today's *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keeps our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing. Suggest passages you would like to hear us talk about on future *Groundwork* programs. Just visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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