

“WHEN ROOSTERS CROW” **(Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75)**

One of the things I love about living in Gold Beach, and am reminded of every time I go to a larger city, is that it is so peaceful and quiet. Sometimes at night all you can hear is the ocean. But there are also some Gold Beach sounds that are very distinct and catch your attention. One of those sounds is the town siren that alerts residents when there’s a fire or tsunami – and for many years it went off every day at noon. I never thought about where the siren was located until one day I was with Matt, who was just a baby, and I was pushing him in a stroller across the parking lot by the Ellensburg theatre down on Moore street, when the noon siren went off, and I discovered where the siren was located. We were right underneath it, and it was loud. Matt started screaming – I couldn’t hear his scream, but I could see his face, and did everything I could to cover his ears.

Another sound I had to get used to was the foghorn down by the jetty. I first heard it when I was trying to get to sleep one night, and I lay awake waiting for it to go off again. It sounded every 22 seconds, by the way, because I counted. Although sirens and foghorns can be annoying, they serve an important purpose of alerting and warning – they’re designed to get our attention.

One sound we don’t hear very often is the sound of a rooster crowing. Roosters are known for their clocklike habit of crowing in the early morning hours, and when they crow at sunrise, it signals the beginning of a new day. Someone who gets up early will say they “get up with the roosters.” The most famous rooster in the Bible is the one that God used to awaken the conscience of His most outspoken disciple, Peter, and the sound of this rooster would be the turning point in his life.

Peter is one of the more fascinating characters in the Bible because we so easily identify with him. We like him because of his bravado, but we also like him because he’s so human. He’s the same guy that jumps out of the boat to walk on water, and just moments later begins to sink. Peter reminds us how easy it is to have good intentions of following Jesus, but end up failing Him. Try as we might, there are going to be times when we mess up and fall short in our Christian walk. This is why the story of Peter and the rooster is so valuable, for in it we see not only the steps that lead to spiritual failure, but the steps that lead to spiritual restoration. Today we’re going to see four steps down, and four steps back up.

The story begins in Matthew 26:31. In chapter 26 Matthew takes us through the final hours leading to Jesus’ death. It’s probably very late Thursday night, just hours before He goes to the cross. Jesus has just concluded the Passover meal with His disciples in the Upper Room, and Judas has left the group to arrange his betrayal of Jesus with the Jewish authorities. After Jesus and the disciples sing a hymn, they leave the Upper Room in Jerusalem and make the half-hour walk to the Mount of Olives. When we think of mountains in Oregon we think of really tall mountains, but the Mount of Olives is more like hill, a few hundred feet higher than the temple mount in Jerusalem.

In verse 31 Jesus makes a stunning announcement... “Then Jesus told them, ‘This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee” (31-32). “Before the night is over,” Jesus says, “All of you – not just one or two of you – all of you will fall away and desert me. Before the sun comes up in the morning, you’ll all disown me – you’ll deny me – and you’ll run and hide.” In spite of the fact that Jesus has prepared them for His arrest and death, comforted them with His promise of the Holy Spirit, and prayed for them to be set apart and unified – they will all fall away.

If they – the disciples can fall away – what does that say about us? We're no different. The question becomes "Why?" Why would they fall away and deny Jesus? While all eleven disciples fall away, Peter is the poster boy – he has the most visible and dramatic fall, and right away – in verse 31 – we see the first of four steps that lead to his downfall... Number one is **the fear of associating with Jesus**. Jesus says, "You will fall away on account of me... you'll disown me out of fear of what associating with me will mean for you."

It doesn't take long after becoming a Christian that you realize how out of step the Christian life is with the rest of the world. If you simply live the Christian life and follow the teachings of the Bible, you'll stand out – you'll be different – and being different than the rest of the world invites persecution. Most Christians are not prepared for the backlash that comes by living according to God's values and God's priorities. Even though our hearts belong to God, we still care about what others think, we don't want to stand out, we don't want to be ridiculed or embarrassed, we don't want to be left out.

The Bible tells us many times to not be surprised by the backlash – it goes with the territory. For example, in John 15:18-19 Jesus says, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." "Don't take it personally," Jesus says, "The reason the world hates you is because of your association with me."

When hatred and persecution come, our natural temptation is to dissociate ourselves with Jesus. We deny Him. Our denials are not so much in what we say, but what we don't say. For fear of an eyeroll, for fear of being left out, for fear of being typecast as one of those crazy Christians, we deny Him with silence, we keep our mouths shut. A good example of this is found in John 12:42-43... "Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God." Today being cast out of the synagogue might mean being unfriended or cancelled on social media, it might mean not being invited to gatherings, it might mean getting a cold shoulder from someone.

Jesus says that the falling away of the disciples was predicted by the prophet Zechariah who said that when the shepherd (Jesus) was struck down (referring to the cross), the sheep would scatter. Without a shepherd and on their own, the sheep would scatter in fear. What was prophesied 500 years earlier was going to be fulfilled this very night.

But Jesus also adds an encouraging word of hope – their falling away and scattering would not be permanent. "After I am raised," He says, "I will go ahead of you to Galilee – I will go back home to where I first called you – and the sheep will reunite with their shepherd." Galilee will be the place where Peter and the rest of the disciples will be forgiven and restored to the Lord. But on this night, all the disciples will fall away and desert the Lord.

The first step in Peter's downfall is fear of associating with Jesus. The second step is **overconfidence in his own strength**. We see this in verses 33-35... "Peter replied, 'Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will. 'Truly I tell you,' Jesus answered, 'this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.' But Peter declared, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.' And all the other disciples said the same."

Knowing what we know now, we'd like to grab Peter and say, "Watch out, you're setting yourself up for a fall." Peter is quick to speak and slow to listen. He makes three mistakes all in a row. First, he claims to know more than Jesus. Jesus has just said they would all fall away, and Peter says, "Your wrong, Lord. I never will." Second, He pridefully places himself above the other disciples... "Those guys over there may forsake you, but I never will." Third, he doubles down in his bravado. Even after Jesus tells Peter that before sunup, that very night. he will deny him not once, but three times, Peter says, "Even if I have to die for you, I will never disown you."

Peter has a very inflated view of himself, and like so many of us, does not see himself correctly. He thinks he's stronger than he really is. Paul warns against overconfidence in 1 Corinthians 10:12... "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" This is the New Testament equivalent of Proverbs 16:18 where it says, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."

During the Civil War, a Union general named John Sedgwick was looking over a barricade the enemy that was off in the distance, when one of his officers suggested that he stay behind the barricade. "Nonsense," he said. "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist--." Those were his final words. True story. He thought he was safe, but he was dead wrong. Statistics say that 59% of parachute deaths are suffered by elite jumpers – those with two hundred to one thousand jumps. No matter how good or experienced you are, all of us must guard against overconfidence.

The Bible is full of stories about deeply committed people of God who stumbled and fell into sin... Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all fell hard. Moses, the great deliverer murdered an Egyptian guard in anger, and was kept from the Promised Land because he struck the rock in anger. You think of David, a man after God's own heart, who committed adultery and plotted a murder against Bathsheba's husband. There's Samson and Jonah, and the list goes on and on.

In Luke's account, Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift each of you like wheat" (Luke 22:31). Satan delights in taking strong, mature Christians who think they are above temptation and destroy them. Whenever we see a Christian fall, we should say, "There but for the grace of God go I." Given the right circumstances, anyone of us could fall just as hard as these Bible heroes.

The more aware we are of our weakness, the more we depend on the Lord. When we feel strong, we depend more on ourselves, and that's when the enemy pounces. The primary warning sign that we are overconfident in our own strength is when we fail to pray. Next week we will see that while Jesus is praying in the garden and humbling Himself before the Father, the disciples are asleep. And because they do not pray, they are not prepared for when the soldiers come and arrest Jesus. They scatter and flee.

Let's skip all the way down now to verse 58. Jesus has now been betrayed and arrested and taken to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, to be questioned. Verse 58 says, "But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome." Notice where Peter is... at a distance. His bravado has worn off and he tries to keep a low-profile, blending into the crowd. Jesus has already been taken inside, but some are still in the courtyard outside the house, waiting to see what will happen, and Peter joins them.

We pick up the story in verse 69... "Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. 'You also were with Jesus of Galilee,' she said." How did she know? Peter was so confident that he hadn't thought through what he would do if he was identified. So he plays dumb. Verse 70, "But he denied it before them all. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said."

His lie seems to work, at least he thinks it does. But as he stands around the fire talking to the soldiers, he notices a few people looking at him closely and whispering to each other. Peter turns to walk out of the courtyard, and as he does verses 71-72 says, “Then 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.’ He denied it again, with an oath: ‘I don’t know the man!’”

This time Peter emphasizes his denial with an oath... something like “I swear to God,” or “I swear on my mother’s grave,” I do not know the man! Peter knows he’s in big trouble. If he tries to leave, he will arouse even more suspicion – but if he stays, he might be found out. He sits back down by the fire and Luke says an hour goes by. It looks as if Jesus’ questioning by the high priest may be winding up, and this may soon be all over.

But then it happens again. Verse 73... “After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, ‘Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away.’” John’s account says this accuser is a relative of Malchus, the man whose ear Peter cut off when Jesus was arrested. He saw Peter firsthand with Jesus. And he adds, “Your Galilean accent gives you away.” Just as you can tell someone’s from the south or from England, Peter’s accent shows his association with the man from Galilee. Peter is trapped and he knows it. Verse 74, “Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know the man!’” (Peter puts a curse upon himself... “May God strike me dead if I have ever heard of this man Jesus. I do not know him”). Immediately a rooster crowed.”

How did a man who just a few hours earlier bragged that he would never fall away from the Lord end up denying that he even knew Jesus three times? As we’ve already seen, it begins with a fear of what might happen to him though his association with Jesus – Jesus said, “You will fall away on account of my name,” and that’s exactly what happens. We also saw that Peter overestimates his own strength – and when the pressure is on, he falls hard.

The third step in Peter’s downfall is that he **underestimates the power of the enemy**. The Lord’s prayer says, “Lead me not into temptation,” and Peter walks right into enemy territory without his spiritual armor. When we look at all four gospel accounts of this story, an interesting sequence emerges. As Peter first enters the courtyard, he *stands* by the fire with Jesus’ enemies. A little while later we find him *sitting* by the fire. Instead of leaving, Peter *lingers* by the fire for at least another hour. It kind of sounds like Psalm 1:1 which says, “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinner, or sit in the seat of mockers.” Peter walks right into enemy territory and is not prepared for the battle.

Some Christians are the same way... “I can be around worldly people and not be influenced by them... I can watch certain videos online and not have lustful thoughts... I can be alone with my girlfriend or boyfriend and not cross the line... I can drink a little and not become addicted.” Just a few hours earlier in the garden Jesus said, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Peter thinks he is strong, but under pressure he caves. He’s not ready for the onslaught of the enemy because he’s operating completely in the flesh.

In Ephesians 6:13 Paul says, “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” Peter did not have his spiritual armor on – he didn’t pray and he didn’t rely on the Lord’s power – and he walks right into enemy territory and is ambushed.

There's a fourth step to Peter's fall, and that is that **he becomes trapped in a progression of sin**. Peter thinks his first denial will be the end, but it's only the beginning of a downward spiral. It's like Pinocchio who tells one lie, and has to tell another lie to cover up his first lie, and a third lie to cover up his second. His nose grows so large with each lie that he becomes trapped in his own home and can't move.

I think of another great Bible hero who got caught in a similar downward spiral of sin because he didn't have his spiritual armor on. King David was walking on the roof of his palace one evening, when he should have been out fighting with his men, and he sees Bathsheba bathing – he sends for her and commits adultery. Here the man after God's own heart is operating completely in the flesh. When Bathsheba becomes pregnant, he tries to cover up his sin by having her husband, Uriah, come home from the battlefield to make it seem like it's his baby. When Uriah refuses, David has him placed on the front line of the battlefield so that he is killed. David ends up breaking all ten commandments.

I heard someone say one time that sin does not stand still – if left unchecked, it will take you farther than you ever expected to go, and cost you more than you ever expected to pay. I'm quite sure that David and Peter never expected to do what they did, but if it happened to them, it can happen to any of us.

Thankfully, Peter's story does not end here. We not only see the steps that lead to his spiritual failure, but also the steps that lead to his spiritual restoration. Verses 74b-75 says, “Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.” Step number one is he **hears the rooster crow**. Can you imagine how Peter feels when he hears this? His heart must have skipped a beat or two. “Oh, the rooster.” Just as a siren alerts you that there's a fire or tsunami, the rooster's crow awakens Peter's conscience. When you and I fail the Lord, He uses roosters to convict us...

- It may be while you're listening to a sermon or reading the Bible, and you sense the Holy Spirit's conviction. He gets your attention and alerts you that something is wrong.
- Sometimes God uses pain or unpleasant circumstances to awaken us.
- Other times He uses other people, as He did with David when He sent the prophet Nathan to confront him. David had been hiding his sin for almost a year, and Nathan told David a story about a rich man who stole a poor man's only lamb. David was incensed and said, “This man should die.” Nathan looks straight at David and says, “You are the man. You stole what doesn't belong to you.” David melted... “I have sinned against the Lord.”

Someone said that our conscience is the little red light of soul. When a warning light on your dashboard starts blinking, you can ignore it, you can take a hammer and break the dashboard, or you can heed the warning. We can be thankful for roosters that crow, but there comes a point if we don't listen to the Holy Spirit's conviction that God will stop sending roosters. David, as well as Peter, listened.

Step number two in Peter's restoration is that **he remembers the words of Jesus**. He remembers what Jesus said about the rooster, and how before the day breaks Peter will have denied the Lord three times. For the past few hours, in the crucible of temptation, Peter had forgotten. Jesus warned him, but Peter ignored Jesus' words and fell into temptation. Psalm 119:11 says, *“Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee.”* Peter heard what Jesus said in the garden, but He didn't hide His words in his heart, and so he forgot them. When the spiritual battle began, he did not have the Word of God to guard him.

Step number three in Peter's restoration is that **he feels the love of Jesus**. Luke's account says that when the rooster crows, Jesus was coming out into the courtyard and turned and looked straight at Peter. By this time Jesus' face is black and blue and His eyes almost swollen shut. Blood runs from his lips. He doesn't say a word, but simply looks at Peter. What kind of a look was it? Based on how graciously Jesus later treats His enemies on the cross, I think Jesus looks at His friend Peter with love and compassion, and it melts Peter. It's a look He will never forget. It's good for us to remember that when we fail the Lord, He doesn't stop loving us – there is nothing that can separate a true believer from the love of God. We can be out of fellowship with Him, but His love for us is secure.

The rooster's crow, the remembering of what God said, and the look of Jesus led to step number four... **he cries tears of repentance**. Matthew says he went outside the courtyard and wept bitterly. What kind of tears are they? Lots of people cry when they get caught, but we know from how Peter lives from this point on that his tears were tears of deep repentance.

There's a big difference between repentance and remorse. Judas also cried – he also felt guilty for what he had done – but he went out and hanged himself. His remorse did not lead to repentance. Peter's did. The Peter we see after the rooster's crow is completely different to the Peter before the crow. You can tell as you read his letters in 1 & 2 Peter that he learned many lessons that night. Never again did he fear associating with Jesus – tradition says that he died a martyr's death by crucifixion, just like Jesus. Never again did he brag and rely on his own strength, and think he was better than his brothers. Never again did he operate in the flesh without his spiritual armor. And never again did he set himself up for failure and get trapped in a progression of sin. Like a bone that is made stronger after it is broken, Peter was made stronger than he was before. Peter did much more for the Lord after his fall than he did before. And the same transformation can take place in our lives.