



# Christ Reformed Community Church

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## “Cracking Under Pressure” Mark 14:66–72

Well, as you know, we want to continue our study in the Gospel of Mark, and so take your Bibles and turn with me to Mark chapter 14, Mark chapter 14. The title of the message this morning: “Cracking Under Pressure,” “Cracking Under Pressure.” We want to look together at this account of the apostle Peter’s denial of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to do that, I want you to stand in honor of the reading of God’s Word. We’ve already looked at verse 54, but to provide the context, I want to begin in verse 54. I’ll read verse 54, and then I’ll skip to verse 66 and read through verse number 72. Now hear the Word of God:

*And Peter had followed him [that is, Jesus] at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire.*

*And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, “You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.” But he denied it, saying, “I neither know nor understand what you mean.” And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.” But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know this man of whom you speak.” And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, “Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.*

Thus ends the reading of God’s holy and pure Word. Please be seated. Let’s ask the Lord’s help this morning.

Father, Your Word is inspired. We believe that. Therefore, we pray that it would come to us this day with power. Your Word is holy. Therefore, we pray that Your Word would make us more holy, and Your Word is true. Therefore, we pray that it would make us people of truth. May we together confess Christ and be strengthened with greater resolve to never deny our Lord and Master. We pray for Your glory and for our good. We ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Dr. John MacArthur taught us years ago in seminary that you need to beware of those who are always the heroes of their own stories. The apostle Peter was certainly a man who talked a big game, but when the whistle blew and the game was on, Peter cracked under pressure, and we read about that here in this passage. Of course, we know the end of the story, but before we get to the end of the story, which tells us that he repented and was restored and became one of the most

influential apostles, if not the most influential apostle of all other than the apostle Paul, we need to understand something about his failure. He did repent, and Mark records sort of a hint of that in chapter 16. They were seeking Jesus’ body after the resurrection, and His followers were told in Mark 16:6 that He had risen: *“But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee.”* Go and tell *“his disciples and Peter,”* as if to say, “Remember, Peter is still a disciple.” He doesn’t fit into that same category as Judas. He’s not an apostate, but as it turns out, this bombastic and bold apostle, whose utter failure has been recorded in the pages of Scripture for the world to read over, in actuality, was not the hero of his own story. You remember all the way back when we began to study Mark’s Gospel, we learned that Peter was Mark’s primary source for his material, and so, I believe that Peter along with Mark, and most importantly, the Holy Spirit wants us to learn a valuable lesson, perhaps two or three valuable lessons regarding the public failure of Peter. He was a man of integrity, and he wanted the world to know his great failure.

Out of all of the apostles, Peter is the one we likely all relate to the most. We are all guilty at times, like Peter, of having said the wrong thing at the wrong time and then cringe later at the reality of what we had said. But to be fair, Peter is also the one apostle that we can relate the least to. In this passage, he’s a coward, but there is no doubt that he was one of the most courageous apostles. In fact, we could describe him as a daring apostle. For example, he dared for Jesus to command him to walk out on the water when none of the other apostles were bold enough to do that. He dared to confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God when the other apostles didn’t know to do that or were too shy to do that. He dared to take on the band of soldiers and temple police in the garden when the other disciples were asking Jesus, “Can we use our swords?” Peter just began to use his sword. He began to swing it. It wasn’t a theoretical weapon; it was a practical one. Peter also dared to rightly accuse the religious leaders after Jesus’ resurrection in Acts 2 and Acts chapter 4 that they were guilty of killing Jesus. It was Peter who dared to challenge those same authorities after being warned not to teach or preach about Christ any longer in Acts 5:29 where Peter said, *“We must obey God rather than men.”*

Daring Peter. Daring Peter, we see here in chapter 14 was failing Peter. Jesus, of course, had predicted that all the way back in chapter 14, if you look with me in verse 30: *“And Jesus said to him, ‘Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.’”* That was just a few hours before his failure, and three times, he does deny the Lord in our passages, verse 68, verse 70, and verse 71. He failed just like he did when trying to walk out on the water because he took his eyes off of Jesus. In the garden, Jesus predicted three denials of Simon Peter; and Peter, instead of praying, fell asleep three times, sort of an omen to his three denials in Caiaphas’ courtyard. Jesus in the garden, if you remember, had undergone a trial. He had resolved that He would accept the will of the Father to drink down the wrath of the Father. He had embraced that. He had come out of the garden stronger. Peter was going through a trial in the garden. He didn’t stay alert; he fell asleep. Now we come to more trials. Jesus is before Annas and then before Caiaphas. Jesus the solid Rock, and He passes the test. He doesn’t compromise. Peter follows Jesus at a distance into the courtyard and has a trial of sorts before some servant girls and bystanders. Now, why would Peter want this failure recorded in Scripture? I think the reason is to give to us a theology of rocks, a theology of rocks. Jesus is the solid Rock who passed His trial and was condemned so that Peter, *Petros*—the title means “rock,” and we’ll call him the “cracked rock”—could fail at his trial. Jesus stood in His place and was condemned.

You remember, Jesus gave Peter—really his name was Simon—that nickname, Peter, Petros, rock because of his rock-like confession. *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,”* Matthew 16:16. But when Jesus predicted that Peter would deny Him, Jesus reverted back to his old name. Remember, Jesus said *“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he might sift you like wheat.”* And in the garden when Peter was sleeping, Jesus didn’t call him Peter, didn’t call him “rock,” He called him Simon. Simon, *“Are you still sleeping?”* Jesus predicted, Jesus knew, that Peter the “rock” would become a cracked stone of utter failure. The rock of Peter cracks three times in our passage; but as Peter provides this source material for Mark, I want you to understand that Peter is not the hero of his own story; otherwise, it wouldn’t be told the way that it’s told. Peter learned from this failure, and Mark, under the direction of Peter and both under the direction of the Holy Spirit, provide for us in this passage certain steps that Peter took, steps that led to his failure. It led to his place of failure, but such is instructive for us and such is actually when we come to the end, encouraging for us and for all of God’s true disciples. In these verses we see four places that Peter’s steps took him to. And before you judge Peter too strongly, just understand this morning that all of us to some degree will take very similar steps at some point in our lives.

Four places that Peter’s steps took him. The first, I want you to see with me that Peter’s steps took him to a place of arrogance, a place of arrogance where he lingered. We need to really go back all the way to verse 54 to try to discover why in the world Peter thought it was a good idea to follow Jesus to the courtyard to begin with. So, notice verse 54 back in Mark 14. It says, *“And Peter had followed him,”* that is Jesus, *“at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire.”* This is just like daring Peter, isn’t it? Warming himself by the temple police, some of which would have been in the garden to arrest Jesus. We read earlier that initially upon Jesus’ arrest, Peter had fled, verse 50, but later the gospel records indicate that both Peter and John followed Jesus at a safe distance; and John 18 actually informs us that Peter recruited the services of John to actually gain entrance into the gated courtyard of the high priest. You can read about that in John 18:15–16. Now, we don’t know John’s involvement other than the fact that he got Peter in, but what we do know is that once Peter entered that place of failure in the courtyard, once he was hemmed in, it was impossible for him to escape. And I have suggested before that perhaps Peter went there to plan a rescue operation for Jesus, and John wasn’t going to buy into that. John wasn’t crazy enough to do that. Peter was, and Peter was deluded because if he would have understood what Jesus was saying in the garden, it was time for Him to be betrayed. It was time for Him to be arrested. It was time for Him to submit to the will of the Father and die. After all, Jesus had told Peter, *“Put your sword [down].”* But in order to trace the underlying motive for Peter entering that courtyard, we must go back even a little bit further because the battle of temptation that Peter faced in the courtyard was lost beforehand in the garden.

You remember while Jesus prayed, Peter slept. He wasn’t watching and praying. He was arrogantly depending on his flesh while Jesus was depending upon the Spirit in prayer, and his arrogance is seen in verse 27 when 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.’”* That statement was made all the way in the upper room, that sort of arrogance. *“Everyone else may fall away, but I’m not going to fall away.”* You’re familiar with Proverbs 16:18: *“Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit*

*before a fall.*” You see, it’s Peter’s arrogant, prideful ways and prideful words that motivated his steps to that courtyard in the first place. These were not heroic, bold steps; they were foolish ones taking him to the only place he would end up, and that was failure. In fact, Peter had made really, really strong words earlier in Jesus’ ministry. John tells us that many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him: *“So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you want to go away as well?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.’”* That was a prideful statement. The ghost of his prideful past came to haunt Peter and he’s led, not by the Holy Ghost into the courtyard, but he’s become a tool of the devil, closely associating himself with Judas and his betrayal. Now, we know that Peter later indirectly admitted that he was a tool of the devil over in 1 Peter chapter 5. Peter learned from this, and Peter warned the church. He said, *“Humble yourselves...under the mighty hand of God...Be sober-minded...Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”* Peter says, “I lived this. I understand what’s it like to not resist the devil.” He realized that his big failure was thinking he could stand in the flesh instead of in the power of the Holy Spirit, and he essentially says, “That’s a bad strategy for spiritual warfare.”

Paul speaks about spiritual warfare and tells us that we stand as victorious soldiers in our battle against the word and the flesh and the devil in that passage on the armor of God in Ephesians 6. He comes to the end of it, and he says in verse 18 that we are to pray at all times in the Spirit. What was it that was the one thing that Peter didn’t do? He didn’t pray as Jesus instructed him to do; and therefore, when he was walking to the courtyard, he wasn’t walking in the Spirit. Galatians 5:16: *“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”* Peter was far away from that. What a warning to us. *“Therefore let anyone,”* 1 Corinthians 10:12 says, anyone, even someone as great as Peter, *“Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”* Jesus’ battle was one in the garden before He ever got to the courtyard. Peter’s was lost in the garden before even taking those foolish, arrogant steps. This Peter, Petros, this “rock” had cracked before he ever crumbled under the pressure of a couple of servant girls and no-name bystanders. He was taken to the place of arrogance and a prideful heart, and his fall was long and it was hard.

You know, there have been many great ones who have fallen throughout church history, even those that we would think would be unlikely to do that, people like Thomas Cranmer during the English Reformation, an archbishop who wasn’t afraid to tell pope and king alike that justification by faith alone was the true definition of the gospel. In fact, King Henry VIII had such admiration for Thomas Cranmer that on his death bed, the king asked that Cranmer would come and hold his hand as he died. But there were two other bold men: Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. They were bishops, and they were arrested along with Cranmer during the reign of the Roman Catholic supporter, Bloody Mary. All three of these men, Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer were arrested and brought up on heresy charges for defending the gospel, the true gospel, and it was Latimer and Ridley who were burnt at the stake first. Cranmer was in an upper room overlooking the courtyard. We refer to these three men as the Oxford Martyrs. Later, Cranmer was martyred, but he first witnessed Latimer and Ridley being burnt alive at the stake. And as he stood trial sometime later, he made an appeal to his heresy charges. He signed a recantation, a statement that he recanted his Protestant faith, and he would go back to Roman Catholicism if they would spare his life. He reverted back to the Roman Catholic teaching of transubstantiation. He reverted back to essentially

a denial of justification by faith alone. He began to affirm the things that he had earlier denied, which were the critical tenants of Protestantism from which he faltered. He began to affirm papal supremacy in November of 1555, and Cranmer’s failure was like Peter’s, as we’ll see. It was, if we are honest, nothing short of denial of the faith, and yet arrogance marks us this morning, and our fall is coming if we automatically discount that we don’t too suffer from that sort of disease of Petrine tendency to deny and be ashamed of our Lord.

It all begins with arrogance. It all begins with the prideful heart. That’s where all sin leads. That is the impetus for all sin, all temptation. But Peter’s steps to failure not only led him to a place of arrogance where he lingered in the courtyard. They also led him to a place, number two, of avoidance, a place of avoidance where he wavered. As we move now to verses 66 through 68, we read that Peter was still dependent upon his flesh, just like he boldly warmed himself by the fire and those guards. We now see him trying to brush off an encounter with an accusatory servant girl in attempt to avoid temptation. It was in vain because he ended up wavering. Notice verse 66: *“And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came.”* Peter was below in the courtyard. It was typical of Roman styled villas in the Mediterranean world such as the palace of Annas, the former high priest and Caiaphas, the current high priest. They all lived there together with their families. I told you that Annas had five sons, who at one point, served as priests, and now Caiaphas was serving as high priest, his son-in-law. This was a family affair. They lived in this huge palace, a large structure with rooms all around, a rectangular shape enclosed to an open atrium or courtyard that was also enclosed by a wall, the entrance of which was found through a gate located at street level, a large estate. This is where Jesus was taken. This is where Peter follows Him, and it’s likely that that first phase of Jesus’ trial, the phase in which Jesus stood before Annas took place right here because this is where Annas lived. And it would have taken place in the quarters of Annas, and then from that point, Jesus would have been led across the courtyard to the quarters of Caiaphas to stand before the Sanhedrin as we saw last week.

It’s possible also that the trial took place above the courtyard in sort of a gallery or a balcony that overlooked the courtyard. But as verse 66 says, *“Peter was below in the courtyard,”* which means Jesus was above somewhere. Jesus was above. Jesus was above, undergoing a trial, and this is what Mark wants you to understand. Peter was below, undergoing a trial, a severe temptation of his faith. And verse 66 says, *“One of the servant girls of the high priest came.”* This would have been a household slave, probably one of the girls that stood at the gates to let people in because John 18 tells that there was a *“servant girl who kept watch at the door”* and she *“brought Peter in.”* So, when it says in verse 66 that *“one of the servant girls of the high priest came,”* it means that the gate that she stood at as John talked to her to allow Peter entrance in, she could sense the nervousness on Peter’s face; and so, she went to get a closer look at him as he went into the courtyard. And so, we read in verse 67: *“And seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, ‘You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.’”* I mean, Peter is by the light of the fire warming himself, and the glow of the fire lights up his face, and she recognizes him as she goes to get a closer look. In fact, if you just flip over with me to Luke chapter 22—from time to time I’ll refer to these different episodes or different versions of the story by the gospel writers. They’re all consistent, but Luke provides some clarity. Luke 22:56: *“Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him,[she] said, ‘This man also was with him.’”* Verse 67 says, *“She looked at him and said, ‘You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.’”* She correctly identifies

Peter but notice how she identifies him. She says in verse 67: *“You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.”*

Of course, Jesus was from Nazareth, but she’s not identifying so much the location that Jesus was from. This was more of a pejorative title of derision. It was a statement of hostility. She didn’t like the fact that Peter identified with the Nazarene, Jesus. In fact, later in Acts 24:5, it was said and used against the followers of Jesus by civil magistrates that they were akin to a plague threatening the peace of Rome, this *“sect of the Nazarenes.”* Peter, at this point, doesn’t just feel the heat of the fire, he’s feeling the heat of being figured out by a hostile servant girl of the high priest who could go tell the authorities. That’s what you need to understand. The pressure is hot. The flames are hot, so we read in verse 68, *“But he denied it.”* In response to the girl, *“But he denied it.”* And notice what he says, *“I neither know nor understand what you mean.”* Peter was ashamed to be associated with the Nazarene. In fact, Luke 22:57 says his words were strong. He looked at the servant girl and he said, *“Woman, I do not know him,”* probably because in the first century, female witnesses could be considered unreliable, and he’s trying to point that out. *“Woman, I [don’t] know him,”* Really, playing it off, playing stupid, because notice the way he words it: *“I neither know nor understand what you mean.”* He’s playing stupid. He’s trying to avoid the confrontation. *“I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”*

Now, perhaps he’s trying to justify this with a sort of legal denial. That sort of thing existed in the world in which Peter lived. It was said on one occasion in a document that if an owner says, *“Where is my ox?”* and the person answers, *“I do not know of what thou speakest,”* that you could avoid lying just by avoiding answering the question, and I think that is what Peter is doing. But the rest of verse 68 says that Peter not only tried avoiding the issue of denying our Lord with this sort of flimsy, carefully worded lie cloaked in half-truth legal language, but also with his steps. Notice verse 68 says, *“And he went out into the gateway. He went out into the gateway.”* As Jesus receives coldhearted false accusations above, Peter is comfortably warming himself by the fire until the heat gets too hot, and his identity is figured out. He steps away from the light of the fire, no doubt to the entrance of the gateway to get away from the light so that no one else recognizes who he is to avoid the situation, but here’s the reality. His steps were not just steps away from the light of the fire, they were steps away from the Light of the World. He was moving further and further away from Jesus, the Light of the World, whose light was ready to be extinguished, and Peter’s steps had taken him to a dark place he never thought he would go, further away from his Lord and closer in association to Judas, dangerously close.

Jesus, the solid Rock, didn’t break while He had false accusations hurled at Him above, while below, Peter has some lowly servant girl intimidate him, and he cracks. All the onslaught of the religious powerful authorities threatening Jesus, inflicting blows on Jesus, and the solid Rock doesn’t crack. That’s what you need to understand. But Petros, Peter, he cracks, and his steps to the entryway of that gate were a perpetual walk of shame because they revealed his guilt, and that’s when the first alarm sounded. The end of verse 68 says, *“the rooster crowed.”* Just as Jesus predicted back in verse 30, *“Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times. You will deny three times.”* Besides getting away from the light of the fire, what else was Peter doing by the gateway? He was trying to avoid the situation, and I think he goes back to the gateway because he’s looking for a quick exit to escape. The problem is, he didn’t act quick enough. We know Peter was fast. We know that because John tells us that. After

Jesus' resurrection when they were going to the tomb, Peter and John raced, and John tells us that he was faster, and he beat Peter. We know that he wasn't just bragging because John writes under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. John was faster physically than Peter, and apparently spiritually as well, and much faster than Peter this night because once John got there and got Peter in, John got out. In fact, I want you to turn with me to John chapter 18 again, something insightful I found this week in my study that I want to share with you. John 18:16: *“But Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple,”* that's referring to John, that's how John refers to himself, *“who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in.”* So, John is pressured by Peter to let him in. Somehow, he knew he had a contact. And verse 17 says, *“The servant girl at the door said to Peter, ‘You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?’”* Notice the language: *“You also.”* In other words, she has in her mind *“you also.”* *“You and that other man, John, you have to be one of Jesus' disciples.”* Where was John? John had run away. John had got out of there before it was too late, but where was Peter? Peter entered. Bold, daring, arrogant Peter entered a place of temptation, and he lingered. He lingered longer until finally, he wavered and he denied our Lord. And now he's looking for an exit to escape, and it wasn't there.

After that initial denial, there was I guess you could say, a window of opportunity to escape, but I think he wavered. I think he went by that gate bolstered by a carnal attempt to prevent Christ's prediction of his denial, and he thought in his flesh, *“Maybe I can go back and be strong enough.”* He wavered just long enough for the gate to shut, and now he's hemmed in, and he's sucked in, and he goes right back into the courtyard. The Scriptures tell us, *“There hath no temptation [overtaken us] but such as is common to man, but God is faithful, who will not allow [us] to be tempted beyond what [we] are able; but will with the temptation he will provide a way of escape.”* That way was provided for Peter, but he wavered, and the window closed. And today, I would ask you, have you taken steps in your life that will lead to a place of no return? Have your steps taken you to a place of denial where you are trying to avoid the reality of a sin problem, trying to avoid the reality of shame in your life without coming clean; justifying your habits, your lifestyle, perhaps secret sins by avoiding the reality of the damage they can do and not taking advantage of the opportunity to escape? The fact of the matter is we're all walking on that same dark road with Peter, and we're going to end up in that point of failure because we fail to take advantage of the opportunity to escape, and people do it all the time. And I'll tell you this morning that some of you may need to just end that so-called platonic friendship at work. Some of you need to turn off your phone and smash your computer with a hammer because it's going to lead you to places of destruction. Some of you know what you're doing, and you know that it's wrong, and you know that it's sinful, and God's grace up to this point has been merciful, but don't reach the point of no return. Temptation isn't above any of us, right? And even older saints need to make sure that they finish the race strong, running with endurance.

You've heard it well said, *“Sin will take you further than you want to go. It will keep you longer than you want to stay, and it will cost you more than you're willing to pay.”* And by the way, that was said by a prominent conservative preacher that many in here revere who would make that statement, and then it was publicly exposed that he had fallen into immorality, and now he's dead. This is serious. Peter's steps took him to places he never wanted to go, but he went there because in his flesh, he was overcome. He wasn't a man of prayer as Jesus instructed; he was a man of pride.

Where else did Peter’s steps take him? We’ve seen that his steps took him to a place of arrogance where he lingered. That was in the courtyard. Secondly, a place of avoidance where he wavered. He tried to avoid it and he wavered, and he wavered too long. And finally, it took him, number three, to a place of adamantness, a place of adamantness where he hardened, his conscience hardened. We see in verses 69 through 71 that Peter reaches that place where his conscience is hardened. You see, with every denial, it became easier for him to lie until he adamantly denies his Lord, two more times, actually. Notice verse 69: *“And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, ‘This man is one of them.’”* In the beginning of verse 70: *“But again he denied it.”* I believe this to be another servant girl, different from the first one, so now there are servant girls that are sort of mounting up. The idea is that word is spreading. Matthew tells us in his account, Matthew 26, *“And when [Peter] went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, ‘This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.’”*

So, now you have two servant girls going to those that are around in the courtyard saying that Peter was one of the disciples. We know at least one of these bystanders was a male because Luke 22:58 in response to this accusation that he was one of Jesus’ disciples, *“Peter said, ‘Man, I am not.’”* So, he tells the servant girl, *“Woman, I am not.”* He tells the man, *“Man, I am not.”* Verse 70, the important thing is there—underline it—*“He denied it.”* He denied it again. He denied his association. The pressure was even hotter now because there are more witnesses. Some are talking about Peter. He can hear them in hushed tones. Some are talking to Peter directly and accusing him, and we need to remind ourselves of Deuteronomy 19: *“On the [basis] of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.”* He knows that he’s in hot water, all of them apparently identifying him not only by his face. Perhaps they had seen him earlier at the temple next door when Jesus was there with His disciples earlier in the week, but it was also apparently his accent because Matthew tells us after a little while, the bystanders came up and said to Peter, Matthew 26:73, *“Certainly, you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.”* “I mean, you sound like a hick from Galilee. There’s no way that you don’t know Jesus, and plus, I saw you in the temple.” Here’s the irony: Jesus was accused by false witnesses and didn’t break. Peter is accused by true witnesses and he does break, and Peter didn’t do anything half-hearted, including his denial of our Lord. These repeated words of the servant girls and the men, the bystanders put Peter on a trial of his own. Jesus is on trial above the courtyard; Peter is on trial in the courtyard, and as the words ring out in the courtyard, the accusations come, they’re like words from a witness stand, convicting his guilty conscience. But the more he ignored them and the more he denied that he knew Jesus, guess what happened? His conscience became harder, so that he got to the point that he didn’t just deny the Lord and try to avoid it, he was adamant in his denial of the Lord.

Now, to back up just for a moment, it’s likely that Jesus was still in the first phase of His trial with the Jewish authorities, still standing before Annas, still in Annas’ quarters, probably away from the courtyard, not really around but somewhere in the palace in one of the rooms. For those first two denials, Jesus wasn’t anywhere in sight. For the third one, He was. And what you need to see now is that this denial in verse 70. Notice it again, Mark says, *“But again He denied it.”* You know, we often refer to this as the second denial, but technically this is the second stage of denial because in verse 70, the Greek word *denied* is in the imperfect tense, which literally reads this way: *“He kept on denying.”* This is a repeated denial because of repeated accusations. That stands in contrast to the first denial back in verse 68. The same word, *denied*, but that time in the aorist tense, which conveys an isolated single denial evidenced by the fact that Peter denied it and walked

away to the gate. But by the second phase of denial, this wasn't just a one-word denial, “I don't know him.” This was repeated over and over and over and over and over again to anyone that would accuse him of knowing Jesus, but the third denial was the worst of all. Notice in your Bibles in verse 71: “*But,*” and that stands in contrast. You've seen the first two denials, but Mark's pointing this out, but nothing compares to this. “*He began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know this man of whom you speak.'*” Wow. The Greek here is actually coarse and explicit. Mark says, “*He began to invoke a curse.*” That means he calls down—listen to this—curses on himself. He places himself under oath, calling on God to do such and such to him, to do bad things to him if it's true that he really does know Jesus or if he's Jesus' disciple. That is amazing. “*He began to invoke a curse,*” and *anathematizō* is the word there for curse. *Anathematize*, that means to damn somebody.

Think about this. Peter, the daring apostle who dared to walk on the water during the storm when no one else would, Peter, the daring apostle that dared to confess Jesus' identity when no one else would, Peter, the daring apostle that took out his sword and swung it regardless of what the consequences would be, this daring apostle dares God to damn him, under oath, publicly! Verse 67, go back to that: “*You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.*” In that first denial, Peter plays stupid, stopping short of saying explicitly that he didn't know Him. He just basically said, “I don't really understand what you're asking. I don't understand the question,” and then he walked away. But there's a build up to this, a crescendo of adamant denials because by the second denial, he's not just denying and walking away. The second denial, he's over and over and over again denying it. He kept denying it, and by the third denial, he can't even confess Jesus' name. He says, “*I do not know this man of whom you speak.*” This man, the Nazarene, really, Peter? The one you boldly said was the Christ, the Son of the living God, you can't even identify and confess His name? You call Him “*this man*”? The denial has built into a crescendo of adamant denials and cursings because his conscience was hardened, completely hardened. He went from “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,*” to “I don't know that name. I don't know that man.” You see, this is not just a denial of Jesus; this is a complete and total disowning of Jesus, separating himself completely from Jesus. John MacArthur says this: “What began as a knee-jerk reaction to the inquiry of a servant girl had escalated into a premeditated tirade of dogmatic deceit and disloyalty, punctuated with cursing and swearing, that echoed throughout the courtyard.”

Jesus, who in His trial upstairs committed no blasphemy was still accused of it and condemned, but Peter who did know Christ, who had confessed Jesus as the Christ and now denied Him was committing true blasphemy and eventually it would condemn his conscience. It would get to him. We've got to ask the question, what prompted the guilt that later came? What broke through that hardened conscience that would lead Peter to place himself under an oath for God to damn him if he knew Him? Well, the most appropriate question at this point—we'll return to that question in a moment. The most important question at this point is what caused Peter to reach this dark place of denial in the first place? We're talking about his steps that led there. Turn back with me to John 18 again because John is so insightful. He reveals to us what really prompted this hardened conscience. Of course, it was a domino effect, but this is kind of the thing that broke him and made him harder. John 18:25: “*Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, 'You also are not one of his disciples, are you?' He denied it and said, 'I am not.'*” Verse 26: “*One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off,*” that's Malchus, “*asked, 'Did I not see you in the garden with him?'*” Peter's conscience was hardened

because Peter was more fearful of man than he was of God. He was more fearful in that moment of the wolves that surrounded him and associating who he was as the one who cut off the cousin, the relative, cut off the ear of Malchus, and this relative recognizes Peter.

You will feel from time to time lonely if you’re living for Christ. If you’re living for truth, if you’re maintaining a good testimony, you’re standing up for what is right, you’re living a pure life, you’re living with integrity, you tell the truth, you do the right things, you will be falsely accused because the world doesn’t like truth-tellers. The world operates on the principles of lies and manipulation, but it was John Knox who said, “The man who stands with God is always in the majority.” Peter should have known that in that moment, but instead he’s fearful of this relative of Malchus’ going to the high priest and ratting on him. Such boldness by Knox to say that “The man who stands with God is always in the majority” because Mary, Queen of Scots—she, by the way was Roman Catholic, but somewhat tolerant of the Protestants in Scotland—she said of John Knox, “I fear the prayers of John Knox more than all the assembled armies of Europe.” You see, that is the power of a Christian who prays, and that is the exact thing that Peter wasn’t doing. He didn’t pray in the garden. He didn’t pray in the courtyard, and because he wasn’t praying, he was found denying and totally defeated in a hardened conscience, a warning to us. We need to keep short accounts with God lest our conscience grows hard to sin, and we reach the point that Peter reached. He cracked and crumbled under the pressure of the moment. But as you know, the story doesn’t end there. Miraculously, Peter, by God’s grace, recovered and that is where we find hope.

We’re looking at the steps Peter took that led to his failure. We saw, first of all, it led to a place of arrogance where he lingered; secondly, a place of avoidance where he wavered; third, a place of adamance where he hardened; but notice with me, finally, number four, he came finally to a place of acceptance where he remembered. And praise God he remembered! Notice verse 72: “*And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ And he broke down and wept.*” When it says “*immediately the rooster crowed a second time,*” immediately refers to after Peter’s third denial, the one we just spoke about in verse 71 where he invoked the curse. Immediately after that, Jesus’ prophecy was fulfilled, that “*Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.*” Now, I don’t agree with those who say this is the climax of the story. The climax of the story is not Peter’s denial. It’s not in what he heard in the crow of the rooster. What was more lifechanging for Peter was not in what he did but what Jesus did for him; not what Peter heard in the sounding of that rooster alarm but what he saw, and what did he see? Verse 72 tells us: “*And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.’*” In other words, he remembered in his mind’s eye. He remembered that prophecy Jesus had told him in the upper room a few hours before. He remembered, burnt in his memory the seriousness on Jesus’ face when He made that prophecy, and he couldn’t escape those soul-searching eyes burnt in his memory of Jesus telling him, “I told you this was going to happen.”

But there’s more than merely what he saw in his mind’s eye. Turn with me to Luke chapter 22, because something else occurs, and this is the climax of this event. Luke 22:60: “*But Peter said,*” to the man who was accusing him of speaking in the dialect of Galileans, “*‘Man, I do not know what you are talking about.’ And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed.*” Verse 61, it tells us: “*And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three*

times.’” Some say that Peter looked into Jesus’ eyes and saw disappointment, and there may have been some truth to that, but he certainly didn’t see condemnation because that would have defeated the purpose of Mark showing us the contrast between Jesus the solid Rock and Peter the cracked rock. You see, Peter saw what all of us should see when the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin. Peter saw what all of us should see when the devil reminds us of past failings already forgiven. In those moments, we are to look into the eyes of Jesus, and we are to see His saving gospel. We are to see not His condemnation but His compassion. That’s what Peter saw. Jesus is looking into his eyes. And by the way, those eyes would have been black and blue from the beatings because the only way that Jesus was coming back down through the courtyard is because He’s being led away from Caiaphas’ quarters where the blows were inflicted, to the prison blocks below that have been unearthed by excavators. He had to pass through the courtyard, and as He passed through, Peter denied it. Jesus heard it, the rooster crowed, and with swollen black and blue eyes, Jesus simply looked at Peter. Peter saw in Jesus’ compassion. Peter saw what Isaiah saw and wrote about it, one who bore His own griefs and carried His own sorrows, one “*stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*” And later Peter would see Him as one “*crushed for our iniquities.*”

Peter understood in that moment. He remembered, “I am a sheep that has gone astray. I’ve turned to my own way.” But that is the compassion wrapped up in the gospel, isn’t it? Peter saw and remembered not just the prediction and the realization of his failure in his hour of temptation, but the success of Christ in His hour of temptation. Peter’s steps led him to a place of denial, but he was forever secure because Jesus was in a place ordained for Him as well. He was standing in the place of Peter, tried in the place of Peter, condemned in the place of Peter, beaten in the place of Peter, and crucified in the place of Peter. Peter saw grace and compassion and mercy, and he was cut to the quick in his conscience, and the hardness of it was broken. How do I know that? Because of the end of verse 72. It says, “*And he broke down and wept. He broke down and wept.*” The Greek is a little complicated here. The word *broke down* is *epibalōn*. It comes from the Greek word *epiballō*. *Epiballō* means “to cast or to throw” and so many people say that *epibalōn* speaks about the fact that he cast himself down to the ground and wept, but that Greek word *epibalōn* also has the idea of thinking over. So, just as the beginning of verse 72 says that “*Peter remembered,*” The end of verse 72 tells us that he reflected, he *epibalōn*. He broke down his thoughts, as it were, in that moment, and he reflected on what he had done to disappoint his Lord, and that’s what caused him to weep.

This was not a mental breakdown. This was a spiritual breakdown prompted by remembrance and reflection, and I am convinced that God uses broken men and women. In fact, I’m to the point in my life where I believe God only uses broken men and women. You won’t be used by God until you’re broken. Peter was broken, absolutely devastated. You say, “Well, Judas had sorrow.” Yeah, that was worldly sorrow. That was superficial remorse. Judas merely regretted; Peter repented. I mean, contrast—Peter’s weeping led to repentance. Peter himself may have failed to pray, but Jesus didn’t fail to pray for Peter. In fact, that is what sustained him. Remember, Jesus predicted: “*Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.*” He is not in the same category as Judas. This is a true believer that fell in the grossest form of any sin ever mentioned in Scripture, but his faith didn’t fail because Jesus prayed for him. “*And when you have turned again,*” Jesus told Peter, *[you will] strengthen [the] brothers.*” He became, perhaps, the greatest apostle other than Paul to lead the church. Judas regretted and committed suicide. Peter repented. This wasn’t the end of his life; it

was the beginning, right? He’s rebuilt, he’s restored, he’s rebooted. He races to the tomb with John to see Jesus. He obeys Jesus and goes into Galilee to wait. He’s restored to ministry before that breakfast on the beach in John 21. For each act of denial—there were three of them—Jesus requires three affirmations of Peter’s love for Jesus, to which Peter says, “*I love you, I love you, I love you,*” and what does Jesus say? “You’re back in the ministry.” “*Feed my sheep.*” He boldly preaches the gospel. He strengthens the saints as Jesus said in Luke 22. He encourages the church to learn from our failures, that even through our failures and the trials of our failures, we can become stronger.

Turn with me over to 1 Peter chapter 1 because here Peter speaks to us. Mark 14 is Mark speaking about Peter. First Peter 1 is Peter speaking to us. Verse 6: “*In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials.*” Why these trials? Peter says, “*So that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*” Your trial has put you through a fire that purifies you. That’s what Peter is saying. Peter is saying, “I’ve been there. My trial was a trial that I brought upon myself, and God still used that. I failed horribly. I,” 1 Peter 5:8, “wasn’t sober-minded. I wasn’t watchful. I didn’t resist the adversary the devil who prowls around. Make sure you do resist him. Make sure you are sober-minded. Make sure you are watchful. Learn from my mistakes.” And, of course, it was Peter that requested he be crucified upside down because he wasn’t worthy to be crucified right side up like his Lord when it came to his martyrdom. It was Hudson Taylor, the missionary to China Inland Mission who said, and I quote: “God chose me because I was weak enough. He trains somebody to be quiet enough and little enough, and then he uses him.”

That’s always the way God works. What do we learn from all this? First of all, we learn that the church can be honest about sin because we’re convinced of God’s grace, right? We don’t want to be a legalistic group of people that think we’re better than others, right? Romans 5:20: “*Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.*” Who are we not to expose our sins, confess our sins, admit our failures? The church can be honest about sin because, and precisely because, we are convinced of God’s grace. Secondly, the church must only have boldness in the gospel of compassion. I mean, after all, if the gospel isn’t compassionate, and Jesus isn’t compassionate, then what level of hope do we have to offer the world? Isaiah tells us:

*Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

That is for you this morning, if you turn to Him. The compassion of God can be yours, the mercy of God, the abundance of His pardon, even if you are a true Christian who has fallen into some secret sin, some maybe massive, public even, failing. The compassion of God. Peter’s faith didn’t fail because God preserves the faith of all the truly elect because the gospel is a gospel of compassion. Third, the church can expect both failures and restorations. We should never be surprised when there are failures, and we should never be surprised when there are restorations. We shouldn’t be pessimistic and think that the one sheep isn’t worth going and chasing after. Of course he is. Psalm 130: “*If you, O Lord, should mark [our] iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?*” We should ask ourselves that question. We’re all full of iniquity, and if the Lord would mark them,

who could stand? But the psalmist says, *“But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.”* The church must demonstrate the grace of the gospel. We understand 2 Corinthians 4:7: *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”* This isn’t just a passage to humble Peter. This is a passage that Peter wanted Mark to write so that we would be humbled; humbled by our sin, humbled by the glory of the gospel, the glory of forgiveness, humbled by the reality that Peter was allowed to fail because Jesus didn’t fail. The solid Rock didn’t crack, and the solid Rock is our only hope.

By the way, going back to Thomas Cranmer, I told you that Cranmer saw Latimer and Ridley burnt at the stake, and he looked out that window and it struck fear in his heart, so he recanted all of his Protestant beliefs. But later, Cranmer was given an opportunity to recant his recantations, in other words, to effectively tear up the recantation document where he denied the essentials of the Orthodox Protestant faith, and he did that. He walked to that same place to be burnt, and when he got there he held up his right hand and he said, “The first part of my body that will be burned is the hand that denied my Lord, the hand that signed the documents where I denied what I know to be true,” and he placed his hand into the fire until it was consumed and his entire body was consumed. That’s Thomas Cranmer, one many gave up on, one many said, “You’re not like Latimer and Ridley. You’ve denied the faith.” God preserved his faith because he was truly elect, and he had fallen into a sin—listen to this—that all of us are capable of doing. Our strength is found in Christ, not in ourselves. That’s the point of Peter’s denial, and I love this because I don’t know what you think, but I think God allowed Peter’s failure as cracked rock. He allowed Peter to crack so that we could experience a river of grace flowing down that crack when we accept our sin and confess our sin just as Peter did, and find that same comfort in hope in Christ. Peter’s failure points us to the success of Christ, and that’s exactly where we all need to be pointed this morning, right? Because we’re far worse than we even know. But for the grace of God, there we go, just like Peter. May His mercy, may His grace be upon us, and may we prayerful reflect upon what this passage means for us. Let us pray.

Father, thank You for these words of truth. They cut to our heart. Lord, they convict us. They cause us to think about our own brokenness. They cause us to think about our own sin, but we aren’t to stay there. We are to flee to Christ. We are to flee to forgiveness in Him. And so, Lord, we pray that Your gospel would comfort us today. If Peter failed, but his faith didn’t fail, then we can fail and our faith won’t fail if we’re truly in You. And yet at the same time, we don’t want to fail You. We want to honor You. We want to follow You. We want to remain steadfast, and we pray that You would help us to do that as individuals and as a church. We pray now as we come to the conclusion of our service and sing this great hymn, that we would sing it as a prayer, a prayer that we pray that You might keep us from stumbling, keep up from cracking as we depend upon Christ the solid Rock. We pray these things in His holy and blessed name. Amen.