

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## SPIRITUAL FAILURE & RESTORATION

Luke 22:54-62

By

Steven J. Cole

Date, 2000

© Steven J. Cole, 2000

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture  
Quotations are from the New American  
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

May 14, 2000  
Luke Lesson 103

## Spiritual Failure and Restoration Luke 22:54-62

John Newton was a wild-living sailor and slave-trader who got saved and became a godly pastor and the author of many hymns, including the beloved, "Amazing Grace." He said late in his life: "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior."

Even if your past is not as wicked as John Newton's, you should be growing in your awareness of those two great facts. The longer I am a Christian, the more acutely I am aware of the exceeding wickedness of my own heart. I can identify with the hymn writer, Robert Robinson, who wrote, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love." But, thank God, the more I see my own sinfulness, the more brightly God's grace shines. As Robinson also wrote, "O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!"

The story of Peter's denials is recorded in Scripture to underscore these two great facts: the weakness and sinfulness of even the most prominent saints; and, the greatness and abundance of God's love and grace toward those who fail. For those who are walking with the Lord, this story warns us to take heed lest we fall. For any who have fallen, the story holds out the hope of pardon through God's abundant grace if you will turn back to Him.

Even when we fail the Lord badly, if we will repent  
God will restore us and use us again in His service.

1. Sometimes we fail the Lord badly.

Luke draws a stark contrast between Peter's failure to confess Christ under pressure and Jesus' faithful confession under pressure. Jesus confessed that He is the Messiah and Son of God before the powerful Jewish Sanhedrin, but Peter failed to confess Christ before a lowly servant girl. When you place Peter's earlier confession, "You are the Christ of God" (9:20) next to "I do not know Him," you wonder how the same words could have come out of the same mouth within the space of a few months.

Some might question whether a true Christian could ever do what Peter did on this occasion. But we would be in error to say that Peter was not saved when he committed this terrible sin. He had recognized his own sinfulness in that first great catch of fish, when he fell at Jesus' feet and implored, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (5:8). Later, when other disciples had turned away because of Jesus' hard teaching, Jesus asked the twelve if they, too, would turn away. Peter proclaimed, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68, 69). Peter definitely knew Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Becoming a Christian is a matter of repentance and faith (Acts 20:21), which are flip sides of the same coin. Repentance means turning to God from sin (1 Thes. 1:9). Faith is trusting what Christ has done to pay for our sins on the cross, rather than trusting our own efforts or good works to save us (Eph. 2:8-10). Just as we cannot turn north without turning our backs on the south, so we cannot turn to a holy God for salvation without turning our backs on any known sin in our lives. We cannot trust in Christ to save us without repudiating trust in our own efforts to save ourselves.

But the repentance and faith which save us do not put us in a protective bubble so that we are free from all sin until we get to heaven. The Christian life begins with repentance and faith, but it also continues with repentance and faith on a daily basis whenever we sin or when God's Word opens our eyes to sin that we previously were not aware of. If a person is not walking in repentance and faith, there is reason to doubt whether he truly knows Christ.

Still, we need to ask, "How can a believer who enjoyed the privileges Peter enjoyed—who walked as closely with Jesus as Peter did, who saw the miracles Peter saw, who heard the teaching Peter heard, who professed his commitment as strongly as Peter did—how can a believer like that fall into such terrible sin?" The answer—please note—is, gradually, not suddenly.

A. The course of spiritual failure: a slow leak, not a blowout.

We all have had the shocking experience of seeing someone we looked up to spiritually fall into a great sin. At first glance, it looks like he was just cruising along at 75 miles per hour when,

BAM! he had a blowout. We think, "Wow, that's scary! I hope it never happens to me." But the fact is, there is no such thing as a spiritual blowout; there are only slow leaks. When you examine any spiritual failure, you always discover that there has been a slow spiritual decline. It was probably in secret. He kept up the outer appearances. He continued to look the part of a godly man. But in his heart, he was not judging sin. He was not evaluating himself in light of Scripture. Slowly the air was leaking out of his spiritual tires, but we didn't see it until they were flat.

No man is walking closely with Jesus on Monday and on Tuesday gets seduced by a beautiful woman. Adultery (or any other sin) always starts in the mind (Mark 7:20-23). A man begins tolerating lustful thoughts. He secretly looks at pornography. He discretely checks out the sexy women he sees. On the surface, he may be a pastor or church leader. He may be preaching or teaching God's Word every week. But his Bible study and prayer life are superficial. He isn't judging his sin and walking in fellowship with Christ. He justifies it, thinking, "I'm just a normal guy. It's not hurting anyone. Besides, I'd never be unfaithful to my wife." But, he likes it when women flirt with him. He enjoys hugging them, as sisters in Christ, of course! Satan bides his time until the opportune moment. Then he drops the bait, the man falls, and everyone is shocked.

The precise course of spiritual failure will vary from person to person and from incident to incident. But we may learn how to avoid the slow leaks in our own lives by tracing Peter's decline.

B. The causes of spiritual failure:

There are more, but let's look at six:

- We refuse to submit to the hard teachings of Scripture.

Just after Peter's famous confession, Jesus began to teach the disciples that He must suffer many things, be rejected by the Jewish leaders, and be killed. But Peter couldn't accept that. He actually took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him. Jesus in turn rebuked Peter by saying, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (Mark 8:31-32). We have also seen that, just hours before, when Jesus predicted that Peter would be sifted by Satan, Peter protested that he would follow Je-

sus to prison and to death (Luke 22:33). He directly contradicted Jesus' word because it was a hard thing to submit to.

We're all inclined to do exactly what Peter did. There are many difficult things in Scripture, things that run counter to our liking. If we're not careful, we focus on the Scriptures we like and skip the ones we don't care for.

We like the idea that man is free to choose his own destiny, but we don't care for a God who has mercy on some and who hardens others according to His will (Rom. 9:18). So we clip Romans 9 and many other Scriptures from our Bibles. We like a loving and tolerant God, but we don't care for a holy God who lets us reap what we sow and who visits the iniquity of fathers on children to the third and fourth generation. We like a God who heals us and makes us happy, but we don't like a God who refines us through trials and hardship.

The first step to a spiritual fall is when you start picking and choosing the Scriptures that tell you about the kind of God you like and ignoring the Scriptures that tell you what God is really like. A woman in my church in California had earned her degree in counseling from a Christian university. She wrote a letter to our elders complaining about my preaching in which she said, "I'm tired of hearing all the time that I'm a sinner. I want more sermons that tell me that I am a person of worth, made in God's image." The elders said to me, "When the Bible says that we're made in God's image, you preach it. When it says that we're sinners, you preach that. It just so happens that the Bible says that we're sinners far more often than it says that we are made in God's image!"

I advise you to read *all* of God's Word. Read it consecutively, not skipping the hard parts. And, submit yourself to the whole thing, not just to the parts you like.

- We do not face up to our pride.

Peter believed in his own commitment more than he believed the word of the Lord (22:31-33). The other gospels reveal that Peter also believed that he was more committed than the other disciples: "Even though all may fall away, yet I will not" (Mark 14:29). But Peter was blind to his own pride and self-confidence. Alexander Maclaren observes, "Over-reliance on self leads us to

put ourselves in the way of temptations which it were wiser to avoid" (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], Luke 13-24, p. 267).

Pride is the most common and troublesome sin that we face. Satan fell when he boasted, "I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14). He tempted Eve by appealing to her pride, telling her that she could be like God. Ever since, the human race has been plagued with the sin of thinking too highly of ourselves. This is being fed in our day with the false teaching that we need to build our self-esteem. Scripture no where teaches such a thing. In many places it tells us to clothe ourselves with humility and to regard others as more important than ourselves (1 Pet. 5:5; Phil. 2:3). One clue that we are blind to our pride is when we hear of someone who has sinned and we think, "I could never do such a thing!" "Even though others fall away, I will not!" "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12)! "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling" (Prov. 16:18).

- We come under satanic attack.

Satan had demanded permission to sift Peter like wheat, but Peter was oblivious to the danger, even though Jesus warned him (22:31-33). Later Peter wrote, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). If a real lion were loose on the streets of Flagstaff, we would walk much more carefully than normal! We would be always on the lookout, and probably be armed with a weapon to defend ourselves. And yet we often ignore the adversary of our souls, living as if he did not exist.

- We grow spiritually dull and distant.

Peter was not only dull with regard to the enemy without, he was dull with regard to the enemy within. Jesus had warned the disciples, "Keep watching and praying, that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mark 14:38). But not sensing their spiritual danger, they fell asleep when they should have been praying. As a result, when Jesus was arrested, Peter reacted in the flesh, whacking off the servant's ear, then fled in fear. Now, he came back, following at a distance, and sat down among Christ's enemies to warm himself by the fire.

Whenever I deal with someone who is having serious problems, I ask about his devotional life. Invariably, it has either turned into an occasional routine, or it has ceased altogether. The person has allowed his first love for Jesus to cool. Your private devotional times with the Lord are the roots that sustain the tree. If a tree lacks deep roots, it may look pretty for a while, but invariably, a storm will hit that topples the tree. If you lack deep roots with the Lord, frequent times where you meet alone with Him to read and meditate on His Word and to commune with Him in prayer, you will fall when the storms of temptation hit.

- We respond to crises in the flesh, not in the Spirit.

When the mob came to arrest Jesus, Peter started swinging his sword, but his response was not what the Lord wanted. I suppose that Peter meant well, but his zeal did more damage than good. He was fighting when he should have been submitting. Then, sitting by the fire, he was submitting to group pressure when he should have fought in the Spirit.

Even so, when we have been dodging the hard truths of Scripture, we have not judged our pride, we're under satanic attack, and we're spiritually dull and distant, we will respond to crises in the flesh, not in God's Spirit. Something will happen that demands a godly, spiritual response, but we start swinging the sword or we say and do things to deny our faith in Christ. That's the last bit of air leaking out of our spiritual tires:

- We compromise our witness by our words and behavior.

You wouldn't think that the bold, brash Peter would be toppled by a servant girl, but he was! He was like a mighty tree that has been eaten inside by bugs. Outwardly, it looks tall and strong. Inwardly, it is rotten and weak. One day a small breeze blows on it and it comes crashing down.

Although Luke is kind to Peter, the other gospels hint that his three denials began small and grew to horrible proportions. He first said to the girl, "I don't know what you are talking about" (see Mark 14:68). Perhaps as she kept insisting that he had been with Jesus, he gave the response Luke records, "Woman, I do not know Him." He changed locations, hoping to avoid any other confron-

tations. But the girl came again and repeated her charge, and was joined by some of the men. Now Peter had to stick with his story, so again he denied that he was one of the disciples: "Man, I am not!" (Luke 22:58). For about an hour he tried to block out his failure by making small talk around the fire. Then the bystanders began to accuse him of being a disciple because of his Galilean accent. At this point, Peter began to curse and swear, insisting that he did not know "this man" (he wouldn't even utter Jesus' name; Mark 14:71). At this point, we can't believe what we see: Peter, the bold apostle, openly denying that he knew his Savior and Lord!

That's the awful process, how the air leaks out of our tires until we are running on the rims. We would have thought it inconceivable at first, but that's where we end up when we don't fix the leaks. Thankfully, the story doesn't end there. In Peter's restoration, we see God's abundant grace:

2. If we will repent of our spiritual failures, God will restore us and use us again in His service.

The turning point for Peter involved two things: the crowing of the rooster, which reminded him of Jesus' prediction; and, the Lord's turning and looking directly at Peter (which only Luke records). What a look that must have been! I don't know whether they were moving Jesus from one place to another, and He caught Peter's eye as He was being pushed along; or, whether He was inside, but within visual range. Normally a guilty person won't look you in the eye. But the Lord turned, which probably caught Peter's attention. Then He looked at Peter and Peter looked at the Lord (Luke twice refers to Jesus as "the Lord" to emphasize His deity, v. 61). Peter instantly fell apart in repentance and godly sorrow over what he had done. He went out and wept bitterly.

- A. The path of restoration requires repentance.

I can only briefly comment on several aspects of repentance:

- Remembrance of God's Word.

"Peter remembered the word of the Lord" (22:61). All repentance begins when we remember the word of the Lord. What does the Lord say about what I have done? That is the issue. Men may minimize my sin: "Don't worry about it! Everyone slips up

occasionally. Don't be too hard on yourself." But God's Word is the final authority. It tells me that I have sinned.

- Conviction of our sin.

The Lord's look penetrated down to Peter's conscience. Jesus didn't have to say anything. Peter was deeply convicted in his heart. He didn't try to paper over it or make excuses or rationalize it away. Conviction acknowledges that God is right and I'm wrong.

- Godly sorrow over sin.

This will vary with the seriousness of the sin and the personality of the sinner, but when our consciences realize that we have sinned against a Savior who loved us enough to die for us, we will mourn over our sin. We won't be flippant or shrug it off.

- Appropriation of Christ's sacrifice for our sin.

Jesus had already begun to suffer for Peter's sins as He endured abuse at the hands of sinners. That sacrifice would be completed on the cross, where Jesus cried out, "It is finished" (John 19:30). We cannot atone for our sins by our sorrow or penance. Christ fully paid the penalty that we owe. We can only appropriate Christ's sacrifice to cover our sins.

- Appreciation of God's abundant grace.

Christ's look not only conveyed the pain He felt at Peter's failure. It also communicated His great love and grace. Peter remembered the word of the Lord, which included the fact that he would be restored because of Jesus' prayers for him (22:32). What amazing grace, that Christ chose Peter and us, knowing full well how we would fail Him! His grace saved us and it keeps us unto the day when we shall be with Him forever. If you say, "I've sinned too badly; I just can't accept God's forgiveness and grace," you're not trusting in Him alone. You're proudly trusting in your own method of atonement. Christians believe in and thank God for His grace as the only basis for forgiveness. If you need to be restored, you must repent of your sin and trust again in God's grace and mercy.

B. The path of restoration results in renewed service.

As you know, the Lord personally restored Peter and did not kick him off the apostolic team. When the Day of Pentecost came, it was Peter who stood in Jerusalem, before some of the same people who had heard him deny Christ, and boldly proclaimed Him as Savior and Lord, risen from the dead. If Peter had clung to his pride, he would have said, "I'm never going to show my face in Jerusalem again. Someone else can preach, but I'm going back to fishing." But thankfully, Peter recovered from the fear of what people thought and was restored to care about what pleases Christ. So he preached and God was pleased to save 3,000 souls.

### Conclusion

The hymn writer I mentioned earlier, Robert Robinson, was a wild young man who lived a debauched life as a teenager. At age 17, he went with some friends to scoff at the famous evangelist, George Whitefield. But Robinson was so impressed by Whitefield's preaching that he got saved. At 23 he wrote the hymn, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." For many years he served as a Baptist pastor, but later in life he got involved with the doctrines of Unitarianism and strayed from the Lord.

One day he was riding in a stagecoach when he struck up a conversation with a woman. When she realized that he was well informed on spiritual matters, she asked him what he thought of a hymn she had just been reading. To his astonishment, he found that it was the hymn, "Come Thou Fount," which he had written as a young man. He burst into tears and told her, "I'm the poor, unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago. I would give anything to have back the joy I knew then." The woman assured him that the "streams of mercy" referred to in the song still flowed. Robinson was deeply touched, turned his wandering heart again to the Lord, and experienced His grace and forgiveness.

That same grace is available to all who have failed the Lord. If you will turn back to Him, He will abundantly pardon and restore you to fellowship with Him and to service in His cause. You may be a great sinner, but Jesus is a greater Savior!

## Discussion Questions

1. Is all spiritual failure a slow leak, or are there occasional blow-outs?
2. Does the fact that believers can sin badly run counter to so-called “lordship salvation”? Why/why not?
3. Why is it dangerous to camp on favorite passages of Scripture, rather than to read it all? What are some difficult biblical truths which American Christians are ignoring or denying?
4. Have we truly repented if we don’t feel sorry about our sins? Can this turn into an unbiblical system of penance?
5. Is it right to restore to pastoral ministry a man who has fallen into sexual sin? Support your answer from Scripture.

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2000, All Rights Reserved.