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**The Denial**

**John 18.15-18, 25-27**

**Series: Signs of Life**

**July 24, 2022**

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I. Introduction

- A. A friend of mine, who was one of the pastors at the Morgantown, WV church where I was before I came here, was a trained EMT
  1. In one of his prior churches he moonlighted as an EMT
    - a. Which meant he'd gone through all the EMT training
    - b. He knew how to assess and treat a number of emergency issues
    - c. He had had to memorize lists of symptoms so he could make on-the-spot diagnoses and stabilize patients
  2. One day while he was in Morgantown he was out for a run
    - a. Running was what he'd always done as his primary form of exercise
    - b. He was quite experienced at it; running, I'm sure, 5-10 kilometers pretty much every day
  3. But on this particular day he was about 15 minutes into his run
    - a. And he got sick
    - b. He was overcome with nausea and weakness
    - c. It stopped him in his tracks
    - d. And he lay down on the sidewalk
    - e. People started to gather around him to see what was wrong
  4. His very first response, he told me, was to matter of factly declare, "I'm not having a heart attack"
    - a. His reasoning was sound
    - b. He thought, "I exercise. I'm a runner. I'm in good shape. I can't be having a heart attack"
  5. But there he was lying on the pavement
    - a. Not running
    - b. Not exercising
    - c. Not in good shape
  6. Eventually his EMT training took over
    - a. He started to go through the list of heart attack symptoms he had memorized
    - b. Trying to see if any applied to him
    - c. Chest discomfort
    - d. Pressure or tightness in the chest
    - e. Pain in the left arm
    - f. Excessive sweating

- g. Shortness of breath
  - h. Nausea
  - i. Denial
7. Denial!
- a. “Wait!” he said to himself
  - b. The very first thing that came to him – denying that he was having a heart attack – was itself a symptom of having a heart attack!
8. That’s when he decided to let one of the bystanders call 911
- B. Denial is a very common defense mechanism for us humans
- 1. We can be staring an impending disaster in the face
    - a. And convince ourselves that it’s not happening
    - b. The fire alarm is not a real alarm – they’re just testing; I don’t have to leave the building...
  - 2. It’s one of the ways we’re wired to muster up the courage to survive adverse circumstances
  - 3. But it also can be quite deadly
    - a. As in when you’re having a heart attack
    - b. Or when the building really is burning down
- C. In addition to denial being a human psychological defense mechanism, it has also turned into one of our contemporary ages’ greatest cultural sins
- 1. It all seemed to begin with the rather odd group of people who denied that the holocaust actually happened
    - a. That form of denial was deemed so reprehensible that the idea of being a “denier” has become one of the most powerful put-downs of our day
    - b. If you don’t agree with someone about almost anything, you can hardly say anything worse about your opponent than that he or she is a denier
  - 2. That rhetorical put-down, for instance, has been used for those who question the catastrophic anthropomorphic global warming hypothesis
    - a. That’s the view that the earth is warming to dangerous levels, that humans are the primary cause of the warming through promiscuous generation of greenhouse gases through the use of fossil fuels
    - b. And if we don’t do something about it now, usually by spending a lot of tax dollars, the very existence of planet earth is in question
    - c. If you have doubts about that hypothesis, and raise questions about it, you will be called a “denier”
    - d. Which means you are on the lowest rung of human being, as if you also deny the holocaust
  - 3. It has also been used recently in the pandemic
    - a. If you were to question the efficacy of vaccines or of various forms of mitigation you could be said to be a “science denier”
  - 4. As it turns out, in both the global warming and pandemic cases, the science is decidedly more complex than we are often led to believe
    - a. There are legitimate questions which can be raised in each of those

- areas
- b. But the “denier” put-down effectively silences a lot of opposing voices
  - c. So there are few very real reasoned discussions or congenial conversations when those issues are brought up
- D. The point, of course, is not in any way to address any of those issues
1. It's just to point out that denial
    - a. Whether as a potentially deadly psychological defense mechanism
    - b. Or as a euphemism for a serious cultural sin
  2. Is seen in our society in quite negative terms
    - a. Denial is a social disease to be avoided at all costs
- E. That's what makes the story of Peter's denial of Christ so interesting
1. The view that denial is a reprehensible, or at least an adverse, human response didn't just start in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries
  2. It dates back at least to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century
  3. Peter denied Christ
    - a. And to deny Christ is at least as serious as a heart attack

## II. **The Denial Story**

- A. You're all familiar with Peter's denial story
- B. **John 18:15–18** (ESV) —
1. 15 Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest,
  2. 16 but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, 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.
  3. 17 The servant girl at the door said to Peter, “You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.”
  4. 18 Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.
- C. Following the preliminary hearing by Annas, a former high priest and father-in-law of Caiaphas, the current high priest
- D. **John 18:25–27** (ESV) —
1. 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.”
  2. 26 One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?”
  3. 27 Peter again denied it,
  4. and at once a rooster crowed.
- E. The rooster crowing refers to a particular prophetic encounter between Jesus and Peter
- F. **John 13:36–38** (ESV) —

1. 36 Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.”
  2. 37 Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”
  3. 38 Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.”
- G. It’s all very familiar to us
1. But there is a peculiar problem with our traditional understanding of this text
    - a. One that I was not aware of until our trip to Israel
    - b. One that our guide, Opher, pointed out
  2. The issue has to do with the rooster crowing, or the “cockcrow”
    - a. Our guide pointed out that it is unlikely that there were actually roosters crowing in Jerusalem
    - b. Because at that time in history chickens and roosters were not allowed in Jerusalem due to issues of hygiene
    - c. Whence, then, the “cockcrow”?
  3. Well, both the Greek word for rooster or cock, and the Hebrew word for rooster, also mean “man”
    - a. So the text, in the original language, may actually be understood as saying “the call of the man will not occur until you have denied me three times”
  4. But what, exactly, is “the call of the man”?
    - a. Early in the morning, at about the time when the roosters would crow, a man would blow a trumpet to announce that the time has come for the priests to prepare the temple for services
  5. In fact, when our tour group gathered at the southwest corner of the temple mount, the place where so many of the stones of the temple area had been cast down by the Romans in 70 AD, we were shown the location where an inscribed stone had been discovered which read “the place of trumpeting”
    - a. The “man” would blow his trumpet over the city of Jerusalem from the then temple mount
    - b. Announcing the commencement of temple activities
    - c. And that trumpeted announcement came to be known as the “cockcrow”
  6. So it’s likely that when Jesus told Peter that Peter would deny Him three times before the “cockcrow” – Peter would have understood that his denial would have taken place
    - a. Not before the random crowing of a rooster
    - b. But before the early morning call for temple preparation
- H. In any event, there you have it
1. Peter denies that he knows this Jesus
    - a. **Once before a servant girl**
    - b. **Once before a bunch of guys** warming themselves around a fire in

- the courtyard of the high priest
- c. **And once more before a servant** of the high priest who was related to the man whose ear Peter had cut off

### III. **Peter's Advantages**

- A. As we begin to unpack Peter's denial, with all its complexity, we should note that the temptation to deny Jesus is not simply reserved for the unaware, the uninitiated, the naive, the disconnected, or the outcasts
  1. Denying Jesus can affect the connected, the influencers, the leaders, and the well-placed
  2. Consider for a moment Peter's great advantages
- B. **He was called by Jesus** to be Jesus' disciple
  1. In fact, one of the first to be called by Jesus
    - a. Peter and his brother Andrew were picked by Jesus before any others
    - b. Followed quickly by James and John, the sons of Zebedee – all fishermen
  2. If being called by Jesus is a significant advantage – Peter was certainly advantaged
- C. **Peter**, then, **was with Jesus** for nearly all of the three years of Jesus' earthly ministry
  1. He was no late-comer to discipleship
    - a. Not one unacquainted with Jesus
    - b. In fact, arguably, Peter knew Jesus as well or better than anyone else
    - c. With the possible exception of Jesus' own mother
  2. The fact that Peter was present with Jesus for those three years clearly gave him advantages
    - a. He had every opportunity to really know the man Jesus
    - b. The opportunity to observe Jesus' qualities and character
- D. **Peter**, as well, **was trained in the greatest seminary** ever established
  1. Wait, really? I thought he was just a fisherman
    - a. Well, he *was* a fisherman
    - b. But he was called away from fish to fishing for men
  2. And his call was to Jesus' own peripatetic seminary
    - a. Peripatetic – where the rabbi attracted scholars
    - b. Walked all over Israel-Palestine
    - c. Telling stories; using parables
    - d. Teaching spiritual truths reserved for those ordained to the ministry
    - e. Which the disciples would commit to memory
  3. Why was it the greatest seminary?
    - a. Well, the seminary can only be judged by the quality of the professors who teach in it
    - b. And there was no greater rabbi than Jesus Christ
    - c. No mere rabbi

- d. But God-incarnate
- 4. To spend three years studying with the greatest rabbi is to be especially advantaged
- E. **Peter**, additionally, **emerged as the leader** of the seminarians
  - 1. This kind of thing is no mere appointment
    - a. You can be hired to be the leader of an organization and yet never really be its leader
    - b. Only those who have followers are the true leaders
    - c. And Peter had followers
  - 2. Peter took the initiative; but the other disciples responded
    - a. Peter was the one who could make executive decisions
  - 3. And Peter's leadership was no small advantage
- F. **Peter was** arguably **the most insightful** of all Jesus' disciples
  - 1. Remember when, at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked that greatest of all questions, "Who do people say that I, the Son of Man, am?"
    - a. And the disciples relayed what they heard on the street – John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets
  - 2. And then Jesus said, "Who do you say that I am?"
    - a. It was Peter who spoke up
    - b. One of his finest moments
    - c. **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"**
  - 3. The great confession!
    - a. To which Jesus gave His greatest blessing
    - b. "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."
    - c. And Jesus went even further: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."
    - d. We understand this to be a commendation of **Peter's great faith**
  - 4. There was no disciple who was more faith-filled, more insightful into who Jesus really is than Peter
  - 5. And yet, his great insight, his great faith, would not prevent him from denying the Lord whom he knew was the Christ, the Son of the Living God
- G. Finally, **Peter was passionate** about following Jesus
  - 1. No one, it could be safely said, was more passionate about following Jesus
    - a. His zeal for Jesus and for the kingdom was unsurpassed
  - 2. It was Peter, you'll remember, who tried in the garden to defend Jesus by cutting off the ear of one of the high priest's servants
  - 3. Peter wore his heart on his sleeve
    - a. You never had to guess what Peter felt about pretty much everything
    - b. Peter's passion, his zeal, was second to none
  - 4. Normally, zeal and passion for Jesus is a great asset
    - a. And Peter was uniquely advantaged in that regard

5. And yet, his zeal and passion for Jesus did not prevent his being enticed into denying Jesus
- H. So you can have the most influential leadership skills
  1. Have unsurpassed zeal and passion for Christ
  2. Have the greatest faith of any disciple
  3. Have the most insightful understanding into the person and work of Christ
  4. Be educated in the best seminary; study with finest rabbi
  5. Spend the most time with Jesus
  6. Receive your call to ministry by Jesus himself
- I. But it doesn't prevent the kind of temptation that Peter encounters that leads him to deny Jesus
  1. The point of all this is, if Peter is susceptible to temptation in denying Jesus – anyone can succumb

#### IV. **Two Cheers for Peter**

- A. With our great heroes, as the tradition has it, we give three cheers
  1. Hip-hip hooray, hip-hip hooray, hip-hip hooray!
  2. For our greatest enemies we give no cheers
    - a. And in light of how problematic denial is – especially for denial of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God
    - b. We would be tempted to give no cheers for Peter
- B. But I think to do so would be too hard on Peter
  1. I think we ought to give Peter at least two cheers!
    - a. Maybe not three
    - b. But at least two
- C. At least **Peter followed Jesus**
  1. All the others – with the possible exception of John – had abandoned Jesus when He was arrested
    - a. They had all slinked off into the darkness
    - b. Out of the Garden of Gethsemane
    - c. Up the other side of the Mount of Olives
    - d. Back to Bethany where they could hide out and thought they'd be safe
  2. Peter, on the other hand, followed the arresting party back into Jerusalem
    - a. All the way to the high priest's house
  3. William Barclay: The tremendous thing about Peter was that his failure was a failure that could only have happened to a man of superlative courage. True, Peter failed; but he failed in a situation which none of the other disciples even dared to face. He failed, not because he was a coward, but because he was a brave man.
- D. **Peter loved Jesus**
  1. This was the motivating factor that drove him to follow Jesus
  2. Love often propels people to do things that defy common sense
    - a. Everything about this situation – the arrest at night and dragging Jesus off to face the Jewish tribunal – would have said the best

- thing to do was to walk away
- 3. But Peter did not walk away
  - a. Like the first responders on 911 – he went right into danger with Jesus
- 4. Why?
  - a. Because he loved Jesus
  - b. He failed only because love drew him into a situation which one with lesser affection for Jesus would never had dared to go
- E. **Peter tried to defend Jesus**
  - 1. The other disciples had some weapons
    - a. But only Peter actually tried to use his
  - 2. Peter took his sword and cut off the ear of a man named Malchus
  - 3. This was not according to Jesus’ will, of course – it was an act of the flesh
    - a. And Jesus would rebuke him for it
  - 4. But it was Peter’s zeal for Jesus that led him to be Jesus’ only human defender on the night of his arrest
    - a. It was misguided to be sure
    - b. But it was a unique act of defense by Peter
- F. So, two cheers for Peter!
  - 1. He went into the belly of the beast
    - a. He went where angels, or at least the other disciples, feared to tread
  - 2. The other disciples didn’t deny Jesus
    - a. But they were in no position to fall
    - b. Only Peter put himself out there
    - c. Only Peter put himself in position to fall
  - 3. I give him two cheers

V. **Peter’s Dangers**

- A. So why did Peter fail?
  - 1. Why did Peter succumb to the temptation to deny Jesus?
  - 2. What can we learn from him that will help us to avoid that awful transgression of denial?
- B. **Peter was overconfident**
  - 1. **Mark 14:27–31** (ESV) —
    - a. 27 And Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’”
    - b. 28 But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”
    - c. 29 Peter said to him, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.”
    - d. 30 And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.”
    - e. 31 But he said emphatically, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” ...
  - 2. In other words, Peter said, “I don’t know about these guys, but I’m strong. I will never fall away. I will never deny you!”
  - 3. If we think we are invulnerable, that we are strong



- a. Or that we have certain gifts and advantages that would keep us from denying Jesus – be careful!
    - b. You are well on your way to falling
  - 4. If we rely on our own gifts, abilities, intelligence, even faith
    - a. We are ripe for picking by Satan
  - 5. Jesus said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15.5)
- C. Peter failed to pray
  - 1. Jesus didn’t fail to pray
    - a. Which is strange
    - b. If there was anyone who probably didn’t need to pray, it would be Jesus
    - c. If anyone needed to pray, it would be Peter
  - 2. But Jesus prayed; Peter didn’t
    - a. In fact, when Jesus was pouring out His heart to His Father in Gethsemane, Peter was sleeping
  - 3. Jesus had warned Peter and the others
    - a. “Watch and pray” He told them as He progressed to His garden encounter
    - b. But Peter’s eyes were heavy
    - c. He failed to pray
  - 4. When we fail to pray, we open ourselves up to temptation
    - a. Any temptation
    - b. But especially to the temptation to deny Jesus
- D. Peter followed – but at a distance
  - 1. Luke 22:54 (ESV) —
    - a. 54 Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house, and Peter was following at a distance.
  - 2. Yes, Peter followed
    - a. We recognized that – and Peter should be commended for it
    - b. But he didn’t follow too closely
  - 3. We all want to be followers of Jesus
    - a. But we’re wary of getting too close
    - b. Of being considered fanatics to our family and friends
    - c. So we follow – but at arm’s length
  - 4. Just in case Jesus is in trouble, just in case He gets into danger – we don’t want to be too close to Him!
  - 5. I was always amazed at an OT story concerning David
    - a. When David was on the run from Saul he had gone to the priests of Nob under the leadership of Ahimelech
    - b. He had received bread and supplies from Ahimelech
    - c. Saul eventually discovered it and killed all the priests of Nob
    - d. But one of the sons of Ahimelech – Abiathar – had escaped and went and told David what had happened
    - e. This is what David told Abiathar
    - f. 1 Samuel 22:22–23 (ESV) — 22 ... “I have occasioned the death of

all the persons of your father's house. 23 Stay with me; do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life. With me you shall be in safekeeping."

- g. In other words, "They're all trying to kill me. The best thing you can do is to stay with me!"
  - h. Really! If they're trying to kill David, he's the last guy I'd want to be hanging around with!
  - i. But David says stick with me!
  - j. It doesn't make any sense
  - k. Unless you're **The Lord's anointed**
  - l. If you're the Lord's anointed, even though everyone is out to get you, they can't touch you
6. That's the way it is with Jesus
- a. He is the Christ – the Lord's anointed
  - b. If you want to be safe – attach yourself to Him
  - c. Don't follow at a distance
  - d. Be all in for Jesus
- E. **Peter was hanging out with the wrong crowd**
- 1. **John 18:18** (ESV) —
    - a. 18 Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.
    - b. He was hanging out with the servants of the high priests and the officers
  - 2. Later, these same guys got curious about Peter
    - a. **John 18:26** (ESV) — 26 One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?"
    - b. That's when Peter denied Jesus
    - c. Peter is hanging out with Jesus' enemies
    - d. And when they ask him if he was with Jesus, he says, "Nope, not me!"
    - e. Think he would have said that if he was hanging out with some disciples?
  - 3. That doesn't mean that we are to keep ourselves away from others
    - a. No! We are to be in the world but not of the world! (**John 17**)
    - b. But it does mean that we are to be aware of being influenced by those around us
  - 4. Peter was impulsive, as you all know
    - a. And if you're impulsive you are more than vulnerable to the influence of others
    - b. You can be carried away by the mob
  - 5. Peter finds himself warmed and comforted in the company of those who are determined to do away with Christ
    - a. Contrast that with another encounter a few chapters later – chapter

- b. Jesus has kindled a fire
  - c. The disciples come back to shore and enjoy breakfast
  - d. It is the fellowship of the saints that restores Peter
  - e. I wonder if Peter, as Jesus reminds him of his earlier failure, caught the irony
  - f. That the last time he was hanging out at a campfire it was the night of his denial
  - g. But now, in the warmth of the fire of the fellowship of Christ and His people – his faith is restored
6. That's a lesson for us in these post-Covid times
- a. We've adjusted and figured out different ways to worship
  - b. But what is clear is that there really is no substitute for gathering in the fellowship of God's people
  - c. If you're able – come on Sunday morning and evening
  - d. We realize not everyone can
  - e. But when you can, come be warmed by the fellowship of God's people
  - f. And that's one thing that will keep you out of harm's way spiritually

#### VI. Peter v. Judas Denial v. Betrayal

- A. We've explored in the last few weeks two disciples
  - 1. Who engaged in serious transgressions against the Lord Jesus
    - a. But whose outcomes turn out markedly different
  - 2. What was it about Peter and Judas that led to such contrasting destinies?
- B. **Similarities**
  - 1. Both were disciples of Jesus in close association – the original 12
    - a. Both were with Jesus for most of the three years of Jesus' earthly ministry
    - b. Both were trusted by their colleagues
  - 2. Both committed great transgressions – on the very same night
    - a. Judas betrayed Jesus, arranging for His arrest
    - b. And Peter denied Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest
  - 3. And Jesus predicted both of their transgressions
- C. **Differences**
  - 1. But with respect to the two Jesus only predicted that one of them would betray Him
  - 2. **Matthew 26:21** (ESV) — 21 And as they were eating, he said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”
  - 3. But Jesus still knew that Peter would deny Him
  - 4. **Matthew 26:33–34** (ESV) — 33 Peter answered him, “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” 34 Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.”

5. **Only Peter truly loved Jesus**
    - a. It was clear that Judas had his own agenda
    - b. Jesus was merely a means to an end for Judas
    - c. And unbeknownst to Judas, that played right into Jesus' redemptive purposes, and fulfilled scripture
    - d. So Jesus, who could have changed Judas' heart, let Judas do what Judas wanted to do; He let him go his own way
    - e. Peter on the other truly did love Jesus
    - f. But more importantly, Jesus loved Peter
  6. Jesus told Judas, "What you are going to do, do quickly."
  7. Jesus told Peter
    - a. **Luke 22:31–32** (ESV) — 31 "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."
- D. Do you love Jesus?
1. Truly love Jesus?
  2. Or is Jesus merely a means to fulfilling your own agenda?
    - a. Because that's really the difference

VII. **Peter's Hope**

- A. But Peter's hope is not in himself
  1. Peter's hope is in Jesus
- B. **Jesus prayed for Peter**
  1. That His faith would not fail
- C. That's why there was hope for Peter
  1. And that's why there is hope for you and me
  2. **Romans 8:34** (ESV) — 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.
  3. **Hebrews 7:25** (ESV) — 25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.