



To the Cross: Proclaiming the Gospel from the Upper Room to Calvary

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Failure Is Far from Funny

One of my favorite books is *The Book of Heroic Failures* by Stephen Pile. Its subtitle is *The Official Handbook of the Not Terribly Good Club of Great Britain*. Here's how he introduces the book:

Success is overrated.

Everyone craves it despite daily proof that man's real genius lies in quite the opposite direction. Incompetence is what we're good at: it is the quality that marks us off from animals, and we should learn to revere it. . . .

I am sure that I am not the only one who cannot do things and the slightest investigation reveals that no one else can do anything either. . . .

So, in 1976 the Not Terribly Good Club of Great Britain was formed, with myself, cocooned in administrative failure, as president.

To qualify for membership you just had to be not terribly good at something (fishing, small talk, batik, anything) and then attend meetings at which people talked about and gave public demonstrations of the things they could not do.

In September 1976, twenty members hand-picked from all fields of incompetence gathered for the inaugural dinner at an exquisitely inferior London restaurant.

The book then goes on to describe the most spectacular failures that historical research could uncover: the most unsuccessful bank robbery, the worst bus service, the least successful fireworks display, the worst performance of *Macbeth*, the fastest defeat in a war, and so on. It is a brilliantly funny book.

But, of course, in real life failure is usually very far from funny, except sometimes when we look back on minor moments of our own fallibility. Failure can be tragic and even desperately sad. We can think of marriages that have failed, or of important exams that we failed. We think of brave rescue attempts that have tragically failed, or when somebody failed to keep a really important promise. We are even hardly surprised when politicians fail to keep the promises of their election manifesto. Failure can be disappointing, cruel, tragic – and sadly, sometimes simply predictable.

Here we have Peter's great failure. It is so significant that it is one of the few events that is recorded in all four Gospels. All four Gospels record that Jesus predicted it, and Peter did it. There it is, right in the middle of the story of the suffering and death of Jesus, making that tragic story even more painful with the realities of Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial. The greatest ever story of the redemption of the world is punctured by this moment of squalid human treachery.

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An ordained priest in the Church of England, Chris spent five years teaching the Old Testament at Union Biblical Seminary in India, and thirteen years as academic dean and then principal of All

Peter’s failure is certainly tragic. And yet, of course, as I’m sure we’d all agree, it’s very understandable. And we can identify with Peter. Surely only the most brazen of us would want to claim that we would have stood firm when Peter caved in.

Let’s relive the story by taking some time to imagine the scene and put ourselves in it. Here is how Matthew tells it.

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. “You also were with Jesus of Galilee,” she said.

But he denied it before them all. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, “This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.”

He denied it again, with an oath: “I don’t know the man!”

After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, “Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away.”

Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don’t know the man!”

Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: “Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly. (Mt 26:69-75)

Matthew’s story is full of irony and shock. Look at the contrasting images he puts before us when we set the Peter incident in the context of the rest of Matthew 26.

There, on the one hand, is Jesus – in danger of losing his life, and yet he stands firm under threats before the highest authorities in the land. And there, on the other hand, is Peter – in danger of probably not very much except embarrassment and possibly a bit of a beating, but he gives way in front of nothing more than a couple of servant girls.

There, on the one hand, is Jesus – put on oath to speak the truth about himself, and he does so. And there, on the other hand, is Peter – calling down oaths in order to deny the truth about himself and Jesus.

There, on the one hand, is Jesus – falsely accused of blasphemy (an incredible thing in itself: the Son of God accused of blasphemy!). And there, on the other hand, is Peter – actually guilty of blasphemy in the very presence of the Lord. In fact, the text not only says that he falsely swore an oath (taking the name of the Lord in vain in order to tell a lie), but it also says “he began to call down curses” (Mt 26:74). Some Bible translations add “on himself,” but the New International Version just says that he called down curses. It’s perfectly possible that he called down curses on Jesus, saying something like, “I swear to God I don’t know

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BOOK EXCERPT

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him. Curse the fellow!" How awful!

On the one hand, Peter curses and swears his way out of it when a *slave girl* looks at him with threatening recognition. On the other hand, when *Jesus* looks at him (as Luke tells us), Peter can only rush out into the darkness as the rooster is crowing, reminding him of the words of Jesus.

So here is Peter, the antihero of our story. Peter, the man who wielded a sword in the darkness of the garden in front of a squad of soldiers just a few hours beforehand. And yet he withers before a servant girl in the light of a fire. Peter, the man who could haul in a whole net full of fish singlehandedly. And yet he melts in fear before a few suspicious questions. Peter, the man who swore that he would die for Jesus. And yet here he is, swearing that he doesn't even know him. Peter, the man who was so full of courage and good intentions just a couple of hours before this. And yet now he's full of shame, bitterness, deep despair, and overflowing tears. Peter, the rock, Jesus had called him. And now he's just a sobbing blob of jelly. In short, Peter failed. Suddenly, surprisingly, shatteringly – Peter failed.

And as far as Matthew's Gospel goes, that's it. Of course, we know more about Peter after this from the other Gospels, but as far as Matthew's Gospel goes, Peter never reappears. Peter is last seen out in the darkness weeping and gnashing his teeth. End of story (in Matthew).

So, what does it tell us? How do we respond, not only to what this story tells us about Peter, but also to what it tells us for ourselves? Why has Matthew reported it? Why have all the Gospels reported this story? I think it tells us three things, at the least: failure is a fact, failure is foreseen, and failure is forgiven.

—Taken from chapter two, "Peter's Denial"