

THE ROOSTER, THE ROPE AND THE WATER MATTHEW 26:69 – 27:26

There's a story about a family who took several days to drive to their vacation destination. As they began their third day of driving cross country, the 8 year old daughter in the family asked, "Daddy, when we get to where we're going, will we be there?" You might be tempted to ask a similar question not so much about a literal trip, but instead about this journey we call life. "God, when I get to where I'm going, will I be there?" The season of Lent – this forty day period of time set aside to reflect upon the most remarkable week in human history – is an opportunity to ask basic, important questions about God and about life. "When I get to where I'm going, will I be there? When I get to wherever I'm going in life, will I be where I want to be?" Where is your life headed this morning? What's your destination? What's important for your journey and why?

We've been considering the events that surrounded Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection – all compressed into one week's time – as they're recorded for us in three chapters of the Gospel according to Matthew – chapters 26, 27 and 28. I'm calling this study "Pictures of the Passion." Each week we pick out three pictures, three snapshots, or three images from a portion of those three chapters and simply reflect on their significance to our own lives. What happened back then and there can reveal spiritual truth to you and me here and now if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Our first picture today is of ...

THE ROOSTER (26:69-75)

That's the picture – a visual reminder – of Peter's infamous denial of Jesus. It was the sound of that rooster crowing at the break of day that reminded Peter of what Jesus had predicted just the night before when He said to Peter, "... 'I tell you the truth, Peter—this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me.'" (Mt. 26:34 NLT) After Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and taken away, Peter followed Jesus from a safe distance into the courtyard of the high priest where Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin – the Jewish supreme court – took place. No doubt it was a very stressful, scary moment in Peter's life. He wanted to see what was going to happen to Jesus. He did love Jesus. But, he was taking a big risk and putting himself in a dangerous situation. As one of Jesus' most committed followers, Peter could potentially have suffered the same fate as that of Jesus Himself.

You understand how intimidated Peter was when you hear his responses to the servant girl's questions. It's almost humorous, because in that day and age when women were in such a secondary, subservient role, no one could have been less threatening or more harmless than a servant girl! Be careful about judging Peter too harshly. Peter tried, at least, to defend Jesus by drawing a sword and cutting off the ear of one of those who came to arrest Jesus. Only Peter among all the disciples had the courage to even follow after Jesus after He

was arrested. Only Peter had the courage to enter right into that hostile courtyard. Peter truly loved Jesus even though his love had flaws.

One of the great lessons out of this story is that if Peter could fail, anyone can fail. If Peter could deny Jesus, anyone can deny Jesus. I believe it's instructive to observe the steps that led to Peter's failure. The first step toward spiritual failure is self-confidence. Just the night before, Peter had said to Jesus, "... 'Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you.... Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!'" (Mt. 26:33, 35 NLT) There is such a thing as healthy self-confidence. That's the ability to believe you have what it takes to accomplish worthy goals in life, to work hard at worthwhile projects, to approach whatever God wants you to do with passion and effort. But when it comes to a relationship with God, self-confidence is something God has to utterly destroy in you and me. Why is that? Because confidence in yourself in the spiritual arena of life is the greatest obstacle to putting your full confidence in God. Depending on yourself is the greatest obstacle to a healthy relationship with God. If you've bought in to the illusion that you can know or please God without God's intervention, there's no helping you. You're a lost cause!

Consider Peter. He was a capable, "can-do" kind of person, a natural leader, a "take charge" individual with a "get 'er done" mentality. But Peter needed to experience his complete and total inability in the spiritual arena of life. Peter needed to learn humility and so Jesus let him fail in order to teach him an all important lesson. God loves you enough to allow you to fail on occasion. Does a parent truly love his or her child by shielding that child from any and every failure? Of course not! Sometimes you need to let a kid fail. How else can you learn that your actions and choices in life have consequences? How can you learn to succeed if you never fail? Sometimes failure is the only way to produce the kind of maturity and perspective you need to truly succeed. God wants you to learn to depend on and trust Him for all things. If it takes failure to help produce that in your life and mine, God will allow it.

The second step toward spiritual failure is a lack of prayer. Jesus had asked the disciples to spend time in prayer with Him in Gethsemane, but sleep overtook them all. If you're confident in yourself, why pray? It's only when you come to a place where you no longer trust in yourself that you're compelled to cry out to God seeking His power and His direction. The reason you and I fail to pray - why we make excuses about not having enough time or not knowing how - is really very simple. The real reason for prayerlessness is simple: self-confidence. Self-confidence results in a lack of prayer which also leads to spiritual failure.

There's yet a third step in Peter's spiritual failure that can be instructive. The Bible says that after Jesus' arrest, "... Peter followed him (Jesus) at a distance..." (Mt 26:58 NLT) That's an interesting description, isn't it? Peter followed Jesus "at a distance." You and I try to do that in a spiritual sense at times, don't we? You want to be close to Jesus, but not too close. You want to

follow Jesus, but not too closely. Living too close to Jesus can be demanding. Jesus might want you to share your faith with someone. He might want you to invite someone to church. He might want you to read the Bible through in a year. He might want you give some of your hard earned cash to support a missionary or help someone with a financial need. He might want you to stop being a “pew potato” and actually do something to benefit the Kingdom of God. Like Peter, we try to follow Jesus at a distance and keep Him at arm’s length.

Self-confidence... lack of prayer... trying to follow Jesus “at a distance” – they all led to spiritual failure for Peter. Can you and I deny Jesus today? Yes. When you sing praises to God on Sunday and then curse people made in His image on Monday, isn’t that denying Jesus at some level? When you tolerate ungodly attitudes in your heart and ungodly behavior in your life and then teach a class at church, or serve in some ministry, or pastor a church, isn’t that denying Jesus at some level? When you refuse to identify yourself as a follower of Jesus at your workplace, at your school or in your neighborhood when the opportunity comes to reveal that fact, isn’t that denying Jesus at some level? Isn’t any sin and every sin really a denial of Jesus? Peter was no monster; he was a fallen, broken person just like you and me. If he could fail, you can fail.

Do you realize that we’d never know about this story if Peter hadn’t told it himself? No one else among Jesus’ followers witnessed his denial of Jesus. Why did he share this embarrassing story about himself? It demonstrated the greatness of Jesus’ love and forgiveness. Yes, Peter failed badly. But Jesus forgave him, restored him and gave him a ministry, nevertheless. What a reminder that while we are often so quick to write people off, God rarely does so! “Pastor, you just don’t know what I’ve done. I’ve failed badly. I’ve denied Jesus in my actions and by my lifestyle. I’m guilty of self-confidence, lack of prayer and trying to follow Jesus ‘at a distance.’ I can’t believe Jesus wants anything to do with me.” It’s never too late with God. No, God may not remove every consequence of your sin, but He most definitely will remove the guilt and the shame. Jesus’ love and forgiveness can restore you just like it restored Peter. You may have denied Jesus once; you may have denied Him a hundred times. It makes no difference. When Jesus looks you in the face - like He did Peter after the resurrection and says to you, “... ‘As for you, follow me.’” (John 21:22 NLT) - just get up and do it! Do it for your sake and, above all, do it for Jesus’ sake!

There’s a wonderful monologue in the play A Raisin in the Sun. The plot is about a poor African-American family. The father has died and the family is waiting for the \$10,000 life insurance policy check to arrive. When it comes, the mother gives the money to her son to put in the bank, but he gives the money to an acquaintance to invest in a liquor store. The acquaintance skips town with the money. Once all this is discovered, the mother and her daughter get into a heated argument. The daughter says, “Be on my side for once! You saw what he did. Wasn’t it you who taught me to despise any man who would do that?” The mother answers, “Yes, I taught you that. Me and your daddy. But I thought I

taught you something else, too. I thought I taught you to love him.” At this point the daughter screams about her brother, “Love him! There’s nothing left to love!”

That’s when the mother utters these memorable lines: “There is always something left to love. And if you ain’t learned that, you ain’t learned nothing. Have you cried for that boy today? I don’t mean for yourself and for the family ‘cause we lost the money. I mean for him; what he been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most; whey they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well, then, you ain’t through learning – because that ain’t the time at all. It’s when he’s at his lowest and can’t believe in hisself ‘cause the world done whipped him so. When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.” My friend, when God looks at you and me, there is always something left to love. Get up and follow Jesus. Our next picture is ...

THE ROPE (27:1-10)

The rope reminds us of Judas’ tragic end. Realizing that his own treachery had now led to Jesus’ pending execution, Judas is filled with remorse and regret for what he’s done. He tried to return the money he was paid for betraying Jesus, but the Jewish leaders could have cared less about Judas’ conscience. So Judas tossed the 30 silver coins onto the floor of the Temple and rushed out of the building. The last image we have of Judas is repulsive and ugly – the image of a human body swaying grotesquely from the branch of a tree connected by a length of rope. Judas committed suicide.

I doubt Judas ever intended Jesus to die. I think he wanted to force Jesus’ hand. He might have thought Jesus was a political or a military kind of deliverer called by God to kick the Romans out of Israel and restore the Jews to independence and prominence in the world again. Maybe he thought that once Jesus was arrested, Jesus would then resist and lead some kind of revolt or rebellion. But when Jesus put up no resistance whatsoever, Judas came face to face with the incredible evil that was happening to Jesus and his own part in it. It crushed him.

How can Judas’ and his betrayal have any relevance to you or me? First of all, Judas refused to accept Jesus as He was. He tried to make Jesus into the kind of Jesus Judas wanted him to be. That still happens with Jesus today. Some people have tried to make Jesus into a Marxist socialist. Others have put Jesus into a fine suit and made Him a venture capitalist. Some folk want to make Jesus into a politically correct, diversity respecting, tolerance loving Democratic liberal. Others want to depict Jesus has a right wing, gun loving, government hating Republican conservative. Still others want Jesus to be a kindly therapist who explains away your failures and absolves you of all responsibility. Few ever see Jesus for who He is – the one and only Lord who must be loved, obeyed and followed regardless of the cost. I’m certain that if I spent just one week with the

literal, physical Jesus, I'd be personally offended by many things He'd say or do. But that's OK. Do you know why? The lesson of Judas is that Jesus is not here to be transformed into my image; I'm here to be transformed into His image. Jesus isn't here to conform to me; I'm here to conform to Him.

Secondly, Judas' story underlines the terrible consequences of sin. God can forgive any sin, but God doesn't always spare you the consequences of your sin. Once a thing is done or a word is said, it can't ever be undone or unsaid. Consequences can be incredibly painful and long lasting. Someone here today might be tempted to enter into an affair. A young person here today might be tempted to become sexually active before marriage. Someone else might be tempted to do something dishonest at work. Or you might be tempted to despise someone who is poor or ignore the Holy Spirit's nudge to help someone in need. Yes, God can forgive any and all sin. But He may not spare you a fractured marriage, a divorce, disillusioned children, an unwanted pregnancy, the knowledge that you've been taken advantage of, a sense of deep shame and regret, or the loss of your reputation. The Bible says your sin and mine always pays a salary: death. Physical death, emotional death, financial death, relational death, spiritual death. Is there a more poignant picture that the wages of sin is death than the image of Judas swinging at the end of that terrible rope?

I see a third warning in Judas' story. It's the nature of Judas' repentance – if in fact you can even call it that. Both Peter and Judas failed Jesus, but what they did after their failure was vastly different. Peter's reaction pulled him back to God. Judas' reaction actually pushed him away from God. When you blow it in life, you can either run to God or run away from God. There's a kind of despair that will lead you to God – that's Peter. There's a kind of despair that leads you away from God – that's Judas. When I think of Peter and Judas, I'm reminded of what the Bible says, "For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death." (1 Cor 7:10 NLT) The final picture of the passion today is ...

THE WATER (27:11-26)

The rooster makes us think of Peter. The rope reminds us of Judas. The image of water speaks to us of Pontius Pilate. Pilate ruled the Roman province of Judea - which included the city of Jerusalem - for ten years. The Jews hated him. History remembers him as a harsh, stubborn and cruel leader. Pilate was the man who ultimately assured Jesus' crucifixion. The Jewish leaders wanted Jesus killed for claiming to be God. Pilate could have cared less if Jesus claimed to be God or not. So the Jewish leaders claimed Jesus was a political revolutionary, that He encouraged the people not to pay taxes to Rome and that He claimed to be a king in defiance of Roman rule.

Pilate was no idiot. It was abundantly clear to him that Jesus was no threat to the Roman Empire. Several times, Pilate expressed his belief in Jesus' innocence, but he kept running into those determined Jewish leaders who would not relent in demanding Jesus' execution. They put Pilate between a rock and a hard place. Over in the Gospel of John, we read that they said to Pilate, "... 'If you release this man, you are no "friend of Caesar." Anyone who declares himself a king is a rebel against Caesar.'" (John 19:12 NLT) History tells us that Pilate had gotten on the wrong side of Tiberius, the Roman Emperor, at this specific time. He simply couldn't risk another incident with the "boss."

And so Pontius Pilate chose personal security over honor and avoiding risk over principle. He condemned to death a man he knew full well to be innocent and tried to dismiss his responsibility for it by washing his hands in a bowl of water. How pathetic! Pilate was warned by his own conscience, by his knowledge of Roman law and justice, and even by the dreams of his wife who warned him against doing anything to Jesus, but in the end Pilate proved to be far more afraid of people than he was afraid of God. Part of life is what happens to you. Another part of life is what you choose to do or to become. Just like Judas, Pontius Pilate was no victim. He had the opportunity to act with courage and conviction, but he didn't. At the end of the day, Pontius Pilate was a coward.

The story of Pilate underlines a truth we see often in the story of Jesus. Pilate wanted and tried so hard to take a neutral position when it came to Jesus. You can't be neutral when it comes to Jesus. He forces you to be either for Him or against Him. You can't just ignore what Jesus did at the cross or the obviously empty tomb and sort of wash your hands of its significance, meaning and importance for every human life. Many people try to put off a decision about Jesus as if delaying your surrender to His eternal claim on your life is anything other than rejecting Jesus. Jesus stood trial before Pilate - true enough. But in a cosmic sense, Pilate stood trial before Jesus. Every person stands before Jesus. Each of us - a sinner. All of us are broken, lost and condemned. But it is for condemned people that Jesus died and rose again. Did He do that for you? Indeed, He did, but you have to reach out and take that gift by putting your trust in Jesus as your Savior and submitting your life to Him as your eternal Lord.

Adoniram Judson was the first Protestant missionary from North America. He's one of our Baptist heroes and rightly so. In 1812, at the age of 25 he and his wife sailed for Burma where he served the Lord for the next 40 years. But earlier in his life, Judson was a rebel. Being a very bright young man, Judson went off to college at the age of 16 and there he met a young man named Jacob Eames, a brilliant skeptic about everything spiritual or religious. Judson and Eames developed a strong friendship which led Judson to abandon his childhood faith in Jesus and the spiritual instruction of his godly parents. He renounced their belief in a personal God. His education had taken him beyond such primitive ideas. Prayer, of course, was meaningless to him.

Judson graduated as valedictorian of his college class at the ripe old age of 19 and headed to New York City to seek his fame and fortune. But Judson didn't feel right about his life. Disillusioned, he headed back to his parents' home in Massachusetts, stopping for a night at a wayside inn. He had trouble sleeping that night, because a man in the next room was critically ill and moaning and groaning in pain. Obviously, this man was dying. In the darkness of his room, Judson thought about the possibility of his own death and whether he was prepared for it. He thought about returning to the beliefs of his parents, but then he imagined how his college buddy Jacob Eames would have ridiculed him. The next morning, Judson asked the innkeeper. "That poor old man in the next room, how is he?" "He passed away early this morning," was the reply. "And he wasn't old at all. He was a young man, about your age." For some reason, Judson asked, "What was his name?" It was an odd question, because there was little chance Judson would have known him. The innkeeper replied, "His name was Jacob Eames." The man who died in the very next room to Judson that night was none other than his college friend whose spiritual skepticism had turned Judson away from Jesus. Dazed, Judson returned to Massachusetts and to his parents. Echoing through his mind was the word *lost*. Three months later Adoniram Judson "made a solemn dedication of himself to God."

In closing, look with me again at *the* picture of the passion. The cross is the central, defining image of that amazing, remarkable week. Do you really think you can, like Pontius Pilate, just "wash your hands" of Him? Of that? When you are dead, my friend, it will be too late to choose Jesus. To continue to delay, to put off that full surrender of your life to Him as your Savior and Lord is really just rejecting Him. Choose Jesus today. Choose life. Choose eternity.