

Easter With Fear • Matthew 26:57-58, 69-75

It was the middle of the night. I was sound asleep but I cried out with fear. I remember the sound. It was loud and sort of a combination of crying and screaming. Charleen shook me to waken me. As soon as I awoke the nightmare disappeared and I had no memory of it at all. But I remember the feeling of fear.

If you know the Bible well you may want to quote Philippians 4:6—*“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”* But let me tell you from my own experience that fear can catch you by surprise. It sneaks up on you before you know to pray for peace. Sometimes it makes sounds come out of your mouth that you barely recognize.

We all have our fears. In some ways the list is long, a whole catalog that includes pain, cancer, heart attack, accident, death, unemployment, family problems, financial reverses. It’s an almost endless list. And we fear others will learn our secrets and know what we are really like.

In other ways the list really isn’t very different from one person to another. We are all afraid of life going terribly wrong. We fear that tomorrow will be worse than today and death will be worse than life. We fear the future because of the infinite possibilities of everything that can go wrong.

Simon was not the kind of guy you would ever expect to be scared. On the outside he seemed strong and confident. He was always the one who was brave and bold compared to Jesus’ other disciples. When Jesus miraculously walked on the water it was Simon who got out of the boat and walked on the water to Jesus. It was Simon who declared courageously that Jesus was the Messiah when others were silent. It was Simon who pulled out a knife when Jesus was arrested and lopped off an ear of one of the arresting soldiers. He was even nicknamed “Peter” which means

“Rocky” in English—the Sylvester Stallone of Jesus’ disciples.

If there was anyone you would expect to see Easter coming it was Simon Peter. If there was anyone you would expect to see Easter through eyes of faith, he was the man. At least he started with courage.

Peter was one of Jesus’ three best friends: Peter, James and John. John was Jesus’ best friend and James was John’s brother. They were Peter’s partners in the fishing business. Peter was close to Jesus in every way. And he was a good friend for Jesus to have. Peter loved Jesus. He stuck closer to him than almost anyone else. Virtually every story from Jesus’ biography either includes Peter or he wasn’t far way. In modern slang, they were “joined at the hip”.

It was his friendship and love of Jesus that made Peter so courageous that crucifixion eve. Events were happening very rapidly. As much as Jesus had warned them about everything that would occur, not one of them expected this. What started out as a nice Passover dinner ended up in one disaster after another: police; arrest; assault; threats; danger. They were all scared.

When you read a newspaper story or watch movies about terrorist attacks, do you wonder what you would do in a similar situation? If students shot up your

school, if terrorists captured you, how would you react? I think my first impulse would be to get out of there. If I couldn’t escape I would try to look inconspicuous and keep my mouth shut. If people were dying maybe I would drop to the floor and pretend that I was wounded or dead.

What would you do if threatened by terrorists? Most people would quickly comply. Say whatever the terrorists want you to say. Do what they want you to do. Skip the heroics and live to see another day.

But what if someone you loved was threat-

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ened? If the hijacker had a knife to the neck of your wife, a gun aimed at your child or a bomb threatening your friends then love might be stronger than fear.

Most of Jesus' friends and followers went into hiding. After all, they were ordinary people with jobs like fishing and tax collecting. They were no match for the Temple police or the Roman army. It wasn't that they didn't want to help Jesus, but there was nothing they could do to make a difference. What's the point of throwing rocks at a well-armed and well-trained hostile army? They followed their instincts and stayed far away from Jesus and his enemies.

Peter was amazingly different. He loved Jesus so much that he stuck as close to him as possible even though he knew that he was powerless to make a difference. Sometimes just being there is all the support you can give a friend in crisis but it is far better than keeping a distance.

Peter behaved contrary to his instincts for his instincts must have been to run with all of his fleeing friends. He had more courage than I would have had. He walked with Jesus right into the home turf of those who wanted Jesus dead. In my opinion, Peter ought to get heaven's Medal of Honor for the way he behaved. He should go down in history as one of the bravest Christians who has ever lived.

But Peter was still scared. Scared and courageous are not necessarily contradictory. Heroic soldiers often say they were scared beyond words. We are all very complex creatures. We mean well and behave badly. We say we love and act unloving. We are all inconsistent. It may not be right and it may not be good but it is very common.

My guess is that Peter wanted to be consistent and heroic and courageous but his fears caught even him by surprise. He was a guy from up north, a man who made his living with his hands, someone who didn't know the ways of the city. He thought he could handle it but he suddenly realized he was in over his head. He didn't know the rules. He didn't know what would happen. He didn't know what to do. Peter found himself in the home of one of the most powerful leaders in his nation. Everyone around him spoke in an unfamiliar and sophisticated Jerusalem accent.

Most were veterans of politics and power. Peter was in over his head.

Most of us at some time or other have walked in Peter's sandals. We vowed chastity but got caught by surprise with the power of sexual passion. We swore we would never become materialists and then we were seduced by unexpected money. We promised never to take one more drink or drug and then were surrounded by a crowd with different standards and behavior.

Please don't misunderstand. Wrong is wrong. Cowardice is cowardice. It is a sad moment when persons of courage and principle are taken down by fear and compromise. Call it the "Peter Syndrome" and be forewarned that even the strongest are vulnerable,

Matthew 26:57-58 records:

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

Peter stepped up to the plate, swung three times and struck out. He had come to love Jesus and to be close to him and give him support and instead he gave in to his fear.

The first pitch came from a servant girl who lobbed a passing comment Peter's way: "*You also were with Jesus of Galilee.*" This girl was neither indicting him nor accusing him. It was a simple observation. She had seen Jesus and Peter was always with him. He looked familiar. She was just making conversation.

Peter must have been struck with sudden fear. He didn't have time to think. He just reacted: "*I don't know what you're talking about.*" There, he had done it. It was a small casual but genuine lie. He wanted to bite his tongue. He wished he hadn't said what he had said but it was too late. He swung and missed.

The temptation is to condemn Peter, but actually I commend him. I probably would have walked right out of there. It showed enormous courage and devotion to have been recognized as a friend of Jesus and then still stick around. Good for Peter. He didn't run away. Although he

did move to another place in the courtyard just to be a little safer.

The second pitch came from another girl. She was really no threat. This was a male-dominated society where it didn't much matter what a woman said or thought. Even less important was a girl. This time it was a curve ball, spoken to someone else, but the words unexpectedly came right at Peter. She said to somebody else, "*This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.*"

Peter had another chance. He could have said nothing. He should have just let it go if he didn't want to say anything. Or he could have redeemed himself from the previous denial of Jesus. He could have said, "Yes, I was with Jesus", but instead he blurted out a second denial: "*I don't know the man!*" It didn't come out right. He denied in a tone that almost affirmed it. It just didn't work. He was starting to get into trouble. He struck out again. But to his credit he still didn't run away. He was still a lot closer than the rest of his buddies who never even showed up in the first place.

The third pitch was major league. A whole group confronted him at the same time. They had talked. They knew. They said, "*Surely, you are one of them, for your accent gives you away.*" This time Peter had to swing hard and defend himself big time: "*He began to call down curses on himself and swore to them, 'I don't know the man!'*"

Why is it that cornered people turn to profanity to make a point more emphatic? It gives away the weakness of the point they are making. Everyone probably knew Peter's profanity was proof he was lying. He not only struck out but he made a fool of himself doing it.

The night was over. It had become a disaster. "*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."

Jesus had warned him. Peter meant so well. He started so strong; he had such courage. But,

fear won the night. How sad! Peter's fear had blurred his vision of Jesus and of Easter. He was an eyewitness to divine history, but he blinked with fear rather than focus on faith.

If this were the end of the story it would be a discouraging tragedy. So we must hear the rest of the story.

It's fascinating that we even have this story reported in the Bible because, if you think about it, how did this story ever get into the Bible anyway? Other religions often paint an idealized picture of their characters. The Bible tells the whole story, even the unpleasant parts.

The most likely way this story of Simon Peter got into the Bible is from Peter himself. I'm

not sure how anyone else would know if Peter hadn't told. I don't think I would have told had I denied Jesus. But Peter wanted all of us fearful folks to know that he was

sacred and that he struck out. He wanted us to know that Jesus still loved him and forgave him. He wanted us to know that Jesus gave him another chance.

Peter went on to become one of the greatest heroes of the Easter story and of the Christian faith. He boldly entered the empty tomb. He was among the first to believe in Jesus' resurrection. He took on powerful politicians. He preached the Jesus story. He even wrote two of the 27 books in the New Testament.

Isn't that he was no longer afraid. Fear has a way of coming back in different outfits and scaring us all over again. But Peter learned that Jesus is greater than his fears. Peter learned that Jesus is always better and stronger than his worst fears. Call it faith. Faith grows more faith and keeps getting stronger. Faith in Jesus!

One of the most famous battles of the American Civil War was the Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861. It was fought just 30 miles southwest of Washington, DC. The gentry of the nation's capitol came in large numbers to sit on blankets and eat their lunch while they watched the Union

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and Confederate armies fight. It wasn't much of a match—the Union army was bigger and stronger and able to win.

The battle did not go as predicted. Confederate reinforcements arrived. The southern army stood strong against formidable Union odds, giving the leader, Thomas J. Jackson the nickname “Stonewall Jackson”. One of the eyewitnesses in the gallery watching this battle take place could see that the Union forces didn't need to be afraid. He wrote:

“We called to them, tried to tell them there was no danger, called them to stop, implored them to stand. We called them cowards, denounced them in the most offensive terms . . . but all in vain; a cruel crazy, mad hopeless panic possessed them.”

Needless fear ruled their day!

Most of us know what it is like when a “cruel crazy, mad hopeless panic” possesses us. But it need not be. Jesus had warned Peter in advance. Jesus had told Peter, “*Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.*” Jesus was near to Peter the whole time. He didn't need to be afraid.

Now is the best of times to bring your fears to Jesus. None of us needs to be afraid. The same Jesus who rose from death to life can handle anything that we will ever fear. Trust him. Just trust him!

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