

## Death or Denial

Lord's Day: 12/03/06 am  
Study Text: John 13:36-38

David, the king of Israel, went off one day with lots of people to the house of Abinadab. He went to bring the ark of God up to Jerusalem and put it in the tabernacle (II Samuel 6). There is no mention of David inquiring of the Lord beforehand. As he was bringing the ark along on the ox cart a man touched the ark and was struck dead by God.

One day David decided he did not like the ark of God being 'inside tent curtains', so he made plans to build a solid place as a dwelling for the Lord. But God said 'no' – *would you build a house for me to dwell in?* (II Samuel 7:5). 'Remember David that it is I who built a house for you and I who gave you rest' said the Lord in effect. David was ready to build a house for the Lord but he did not understand what the Lord was doing for him and through him.

Peter it seems came from the same mould as David. He said to Jesus, *Lord I will lay down my life for you* (13:37). He was ready not just to build a house for the Lord or to give all his possessions to the poor for Jesus – he was ready to give his life for Jesus. Jesus said to Peter 'will you just', *will you lay down your life for me?* Peter did not understand that it was Jesus who was about to lay down his life for him. And unless he understood this great love of Jesus for him, even if he lay down his life, even if he gave his body to be burned (I Corinthians 13:3), it would be mean nothing in the kingdom of God.

## Departure

In the upper room Jesus told the remaining eleven disciples that he would soon be leaving them. *You will seek me...but where I am going you cannot come* (13:33). He was speaking about his death, something he had told his disciples about many times. In the other gospels in particular we are told how Jesus took his disciples aside and told them that the Son of Man must suffer and be killed and after three days rise again (Mark 8:31, 9:30, 10:32). But they never grasped what Jesus was saying. Was it that they did not listen? Was it that what they heard conflicted with their traditions? Peter was ready to die for Jesus but not so ready to listen and believe what he was saying.

Peter was never slow in asking questions. He asked Jesus, *Lord where are you going?* Jesus answered him, as he always does, and even promised Peter that he would follow him afterwards. But that was not sufficient for Peter. Mark tells us in his gospel that Peter even rebuked Jesus for saying he was going to be killed. Peter was not going to allow Jesus to be killed – or to talk about such a thing anyway. Jesus had to say to Peter, *Get behind me Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God but the things of men* (Mark 8:32, 33). The things of men, the thinking of men, can so easily and so often take precedence in the life of the Christian and in the church of God.

Here in the upper room Satan had been active. He had entered Judas and led him off to betray Jesus. Was that the end of the activity of the adversary? By no means! Even as Peter was in dialogue with Jesus, Satan was active. Jesus had warned Peter that *Satan has asked for you that he may sift you as wheat*, Luke tells us. *But I have prayed for you that your faith should*

*not fail*, said Jesus (Luke 22:31). Peter did not understand the spiritual battle being waged at this time. He was way out of his depth in claiming he would die for Jesus. He did not understand that it was Jesus who had to die for him.

## Death

We have no reason to doubt that Peter was sincere in his sacrificial offer, but clearly sincerity was not the issue here. Maybe Peter was learning the true meaning of love according to the commandment that Jesus had just given them – *greater love has no man than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends* (15:13). But he did not yet understand that the source of that love was not in himself but in Jesus Christ. He did not understand how much Jesus loved him. He did not understand as Jesus said that *without me you can do nothing* (15:5).

To obey is better than sacrifice. Peter had not yet learned to heed the voice of his Master and Lord. He was not listening, so could not obey. Saul failed in this regard – and refused to repent. David failed, Peter failed and we all fail. Remember to obey is better than sacrifice. These are not mutually exclusive of course. It is not a choice between obedience or sacrifice. To obey will mean sacrifice. It is just that our sacrifice must be on God's terms not ours!

Jesus told Peter he was going away and that Peter could not follow him – for now at least. Peter did not want to be separated from Jesus. His desire is touching and his offer to die for Jesus most noble. But no matter how touching his desire or how noble his actions they would have been disobedient. Peter would not accept that he could not follow now. *Why can I not follow you now?* he protested. I will follow you now he was saying in effect – even if I have to die I will follow you now.

It is very interesting to observe the behaviour of some children. They can be so kind and cooperative one moment and then tyrants the next. How can this sweet little girl sharing her candy and saying kind words to everyone, suddenly stamp her feet and yell that it is her turn next. We all want to be in control of our own lives and even the lives of others – it starts very young.

Peter wanted to control Jesus, the Son of God. Sounds preposterous – Peter wanting to control God. 'You cannot follow me now' said Jesus. 'Why can't I follow you now? I will follow you now' said Peter. Is it so preposterous? Don't we all do this? A man I knew went on a fast until the Lord answered his prayer. Others remind God of the fact that they are regular in church or that they give lots of money to the church, when they want something from him. So who is in control of your life?

## Denial

*Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall* (Proverbs 16:18). The Scriptures warn us against spiritual pride – *let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall* (I Corinthians 10:12). Pride in the human heart is to Satan like a red rag to a bull. We have seen how Peter was targeted by Satan. And so it is for every proud person – not me of course!! I am the most humble person I know!

Peter declared *I will lay down my life for you. Will you just?* said Jesus. What you will do is deny me. Far from dying for him, Jesus told Peter that he would deny him – and that three times – and that before dawn. What a shock this must have been to Peter to hear these words.

The wind was taken out of his sails completely. He must have been devastated. We are not told of his response. All we know is that in the weakness of the flesh he went on to do just what Jesus had foretold.

Eventually however, the wind would return to his sails as it were. This time it would be the wind of the Holy Spirit and Peter would preach the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. He would have a special word for those being tested by fire, a warning about *your adversary the devil who prowls about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour* (I Peter 1:7, 5:8).

Peter was a leader in the church when John wrote this gospel. John was writing about a man who was a great preacher and leader in the church – he had denied Christ three times. How would such a leader today like his weakness to be exposed like this? He might well be judged and removed from his post. Let us remember that Christ is the head of the church. Christ restored Peter unto himself that he might use him as his bondservant and apostle. And what about Paul, a man who persecuted those who followed Jesus! Such discredited men Christ appointed to preach the good news to all nations. As Paul said, *when I am weak then I am strong*. Do we look for such leaders in the church today?

A final word from J.C. Ryle ‘We sometimes fancy, like Peter, that there are some things we could not possibly do. We look pitifully on others who fall into certain sins and please ourselves in the thought that at any rate we should not have done so! We know nothing at all. The seeds of every sin are latent in our hearts, even when renewed, and they only need occasion, or carelessness, or the withdrawal of God’s grace for a season to put forth and abundant crop. Like Peter we may think that we can do wonders for Christ, and like Peter we may learn by bitter experience that we have no power and might at all’.

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*