

He was a professional thief. His name evoked fear throughout the Wild West. He terrorized the Wells Fargo stagecoach line—roaring like a tornado and spooking the most rugged cowboys. During his reign of terror, from 1875 to 1883, he stole hundreds of thousands of dollars. No victim ever saw him. No artist ever sketched him. No sheriff could ever track his trail. His name? Black Bart.

John introduces another Black Bart. If you've ever felt shame and disgrace, it was his whisper that crushed your heart. If you've ever felt alone and abandoned, it was all according to his plan. If you've ever felt useless and no good, it was his accusing finger in your face. He doesn't just want your money. This Black Bart comes to kill, steal, and destroy *everything*.

What's his name? *Guilt!* Maybe there's someone on the planet who hasn't known guilt, who hasn't been filled with remorse, who hasn't ever told themselves, "You're worthless." But I've never met that person. What sucked you under? Did you take something that wasn't yours? A backstreet brawl? A "youthful indiscretion"? Or maybe your guilt isn't the result of a moment but of a season in life. You failed as a parent. You blew it in your career. You squandered your youth or your money—or both. The result? *Guilt!*

We're in a series called Witnesses to Christ. Today, we meet Peter. Peter is in the courtyard of a high priest named Caiaphas. In that courtyard, we see guilt—Peter's guilt and our own. Beyond the courtyard, we see grace—grace for Peter and grace for us!

To get some context, we rewind the tape and go back to Gethsemane, where we hear the claim. "Peter said to Him, 'Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for You'" (John 13:37). Jesus and Peter had been through so much together. Three years earlier, Jesus was walking on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus sees Peter fishing with his brother Andrew and calls them to follow: "I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). One day, about a year later, Peter follows Jesus out onto the Sea of Galilee during a huge storm. Peter walks on the water,

but then he begins to sink. Jesus immediately reaches out His hand, takes hold of Peter, and saves him.

At one point, Peter says to Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). At another point, Jesus takes Peter—along with James and John—to see His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. Then Jesus invites this same trio to witness His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. No wonder Peter makes the claim, “I will lay down my life for You.”

We’ve all made that claim. When we got confirmed, “Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed remain true to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?” And we said, “I do!” “Will you take this man to be your wedded husband?” And you women said, “I do!” “Will you take this woman to be your wedded wife?” And we men said, “I do!” The claim. The claim? The claim! That’s easy!

As the events in the courtyard unfold, it’s like watching cracks in a house’s foundation slowly spread. A servant girl comes up to Peter and says, “You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, ‘I am not’” (John 18:17). The first crack.

Peter then stands by a fire to keep warm. Some bystanders say to him, “You also are not one of His disciples, are you? He denied it and said, ‘I am not’” (John 18:25). The second crack. When there are enough cracks, there will always be a collapse! *Always!*

Here it is. “One of Malchus’s relatives spots Peter and asks, ‘Did I not see you in the garden with Him?’ ” (John 18:26). “Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed” (John 18:27). Let those three words sink in: “A rooster crowed.” The result? Guilt!

For us, the collapse happens when we say, “Just one more drink,” “just one more lie,” “just one more fling,” or “just one more look.” Crack. Crack. Crack. But one more leads to one more, and then just one more. When there are enough cracks, there will always be a collapse! *Always!* Then what? Enter the G-word. The G-word? *Guilt!*

Peter, after the rooster crowed, felt like a has-been, marginalized, left out, rejected. That’s what guilt does to us. Guilt turns us into miserable,

wearily, angry, duplicitous, stressed-out people. But God doesn't see us that way. Instead, of guilt, God gives grace. Grace?

How does that happen? Fast-forward to John 21, where Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves Him. Jesus asks the question three times—once for every time Peter had denied his Lord. And each time Peter confesses, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” Peter confessed his guilt. What gave him the faith to do that? While Peter was denying Jesus, Jesus was suffering for Peter.

Jesus doesn't wait until we get it all together. Jesus doesn't wait until we overcome our temptations and fight our demons and conquer our sin. “God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). In our courtyard, we see guilt. Beyond the courtyard—at the cross—we see grace. And grace means what?

The comeback! Who preaches the sermon on Pentecost? *Peter*. Whose sermon converts three thousand people? *Peter's*. Who writes two books in the New Testament? *Peter*. Listen closely. Comebacks don't depend on how much we love Jesus. Comebacks depend on how much Jesus loves us. Comebacks don't depend on what we do for Jesus. Comebacks depend on what Jesus does for us. Comebacks don't depend on us giving our life for Jesus. Comebacks depend on Jesus giving His life for us.

Remember Black Bart? He was finally nothing to be afraid of. When the authorities tracked him down, they didn't find a bloodthirsty bandit. They found a mild-tempered businessman from Decatur, Illinois. The man pictured storming through the Wild West on his horse was so afraid of riding horses that he rode around in a horse-drawn buggy. Black Bart was Charles Boles—the bandit who never once fired a bullet, because he never once loaded his gun!

See guilt for who he really is. A deadly monster? You bet. A painful feeling that can do great harm? No doubt. The tormentor of our souls? Count on it. But also count on this—guilt is a defeated enemy who has no bullets left in his gun.

What's that mean for us? Our story isn't over when Jesus is in it. We can all come back from guilt. How? The best G-word of all. *Grace*. Amen.