

Peter's Denial

Our lesson today focuses on Peter's denial of knowing Jesus. As we talked last week about the impending "sifting" to come upon the disciples, Satan's object is to cause Peter (and the others) to deny Jesus – not just knowing him, but to deny Jesus' identity as messiah, to turn away from Jesus rejecting him as God's Messiah to Israel. Through the circumstances of Jesus' arrest, trials, beating and scourging, and eventually his crucifixion, Satan will tempt Peter to walk away from Jesus in fear that the same punishment will fall on him. The sifting that the disciples face will ultimately be a refining and strengthening of their faith. Recall what Jesus said, *"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."* (Luke 22:31-32). Peter's trial of faith will not end in apostasy, but rather Peter will come back and strengthen the faith of the others. But Peter will still go through the sifting.

Prediction of Peter's denial.



Matthew 26: 31-35

Verse 31 *Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me,"* Jesus tells the disciples that that very night they will desert him. The events they will witness will cause them to stumble in their faith. Peter vehemently asserts his loyalty that even should all others fall away, he never will. Peter isn't the only one who will fall away. In fact all of them will fall away out of fear, and will hide for their very lives. All of them will abandon Jesus at the crucial moment when he needed their support most. John 20:19 tells us that when Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection, *"On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them. They were hiding in fear that the religious leaders who had Jesus crucified would come after them next, that they would reach the same fate as a convicted insurrectionist."*

The focus is then shifted to Peter and Jesus in verses 33 and 34. Jesus goes on to predict exactly what Peter will do despite his affirmations of never abandoning Jesus, even if it meant his death he wouldn't disown Jesus. Jesus says, *"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."* Peter's actions will prove him more disloyal than the others. They will all flee and hide, Peter will disown Jesus three times in the space of one night, before the cock crow.

Before we proceed further, a few points regarding the cock crow:

The Romans divided the night watch into four segments for guard duty: the third was between midnight and the change of duty at 3:00 a.m., which became known as the "cock crow" (alectrophonia or gallicinium). This fourth segment was still night but known as early morning (proi) and ran between 3:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m., at which point the Romans regarded the time as the dawning of a new day. The change of watches was signaled by the blowing of a Roman trumpet.... That the Romans had a specific time designated as the "cock crow" does not mean a rooster could not have crowed at this point, but the classic

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arguments over whether or not there could have been roosters in Jerusalem at that time is rendered moot concerning the prohibition against foul in Jerusalem in the Mishnah.¹

According to this commentary, the Roman cock crow would have occurred at the change of guard between the third and fourth watches, at 3am, only a few short hours after Jesus predicts Peter's denial. Peter's failure provides us with the insight that we can still be followers of Christ despite our weaknesses and failures. Christ redeems him later, and we will study that passage at the appropriate time. Jesus recognizes Peter's good intentions as well as his very human insecurities and fears.

While Peter's impulsive denial of Jesus is not quite as treacherous as Judas' premeditated betrayal, Peter does in fact disown Jesus "before men". In Matthew 10:33, Jesus warns *"But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven."* The difference between Peter and Judas' actions is their behavior after the fact. Peter repents, Judas does not. When it comes down to the truth, Peter still believes Jesus is the Messiah – (whatever that means, because Peter surely doesn't understand it) and Judas does not. Judas does not acknowledge the possibility that Jesus could or would forgive him and there by redeem him. If Peter had not repented, his actions would have been equally damning as that as Judas.

Denying Jesus



Turning to Matthew 26:57-58, we come to our context of today's lesson. We know that when Jesus is arrested both Peter, and likely John, follow Jesus as he is led to the home of Annas, and later Caiaphas. Peter brashly starts out more bravely than the other disciples, but soon his fear leads him down a path he can't seem to stop. Scripture tells us that upon Jesus' arrest,

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.

Matthew then interweaves the story of Peter in the court yard with the proceedings of the Sanhedrin and Jesus within what is likely the palace of Caiaphas, not even the official meeting hall of the Sanhedrin. While Jesus faces what is his second hearing or trial, Peter will face the sifting that Jesus had warned was soon to come upon them all.



Matthew 26: 69-74

Denial 1

As our scripture passage proceeds, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times, each time more vehemently than the previous. First Peter is approached by the servant girl. Initially Peter attempts to dismiss this issue, *"you don't know what you're talking about"* (v.70). It is not an outright forsaking of Jesus, but he does indirectly deny knowing him. The first denial is a simple lie to protect his identity in harm's way. It appears that this first denial is more instinctual than deliberate. "He may have defended himself less out of fear than to avoid being sent away, since he wanted 'to see the end.' Still, his reply was a lie and as often happens, *a lie*

¹ New American Commentary (NAC)

that led to others, and in the case of Peter it soon involved a *false oath* and cursing.”² But the significant thing to point out is that the verb translated as “denied” in v. 70 is the same Greek word translated as “disown” back in verse 34 when Jesus says, “*I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, ‘this very night, before the rooster crows, you will **disown** me three times.*” That Greek word, *arneomai*, means:

*“to refuse someone, not to know or recognize him, to reject him either in the face of a former relationship or better knowledge. To deny, decline, reject, give up, to renounce one’s own character, to be inconsistent with oneself; denying God to be the Father of Christ and Christ to be the Son of God. It can include the idea of falsehood or contradiction, not only with reference to the object but on the part of the subject against himself, denying that he had any connection with him.”*³

What may appear as a convenient little lie to protect his identity is truly something much worse. It is a denial of the very nature of who Jesus is, the Son of God; and denying God to be the Father of the Messiah. And as is the case of all lies, one lie leads to another.

Denial 2

In verse 71 another servant girl approaches him and states, she doesn’t question, she states, “*This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth*”. Peter this time outright denies, with an oath, that he knows Jesus. The oath is something along the lines of what is said in a court of law, an assertion that what he says is true: “I swear I’m telling the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth” with your hand resting on the Bible. That is essentially what it means when the Bible says “*he denied it again, with an oath.*” A second lie and a false oath become necessary to substantiate the first.

It is interesting to note that just as Peter is denying even knowing Jesus rather than speaking truth on his behalf, Caiaphas has demanded on oath from Jesus to know who he is in verses 63-64. “*The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’*” What a powerful juxtaposition. Jesus proclaims his identity for all gathered to hear, and Peter proclaims he never the man.

The second denial is stronger than the first. It is an outright and blatant denial and disowning of Jesus. A denial of knowing the man, a denial of associating with him.

Denial 3

The third time, those standing with him question that he must have been with his Jesus, they have the same accent. They are from the same place, why else would Peter *be* there. This time Peter vehemently denies knowing Jesus. He swears on oath again and then he calls down a curse upon himself if what he says isn’t true. When it says that he “*began to call down curses on himself*” (v.74) it means that he made statements such as “may God strike me down if I am lying” or “may God punish me if I am not telling the truth”. He calls on God to judge him for his

² NAC

³ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary – New Testament*, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1993), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 254.

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statements, the common idea being that one wouldn't make such a rash comment if one was lying. A third lie, a false oath and a curse are now implemented to substantiate the first and second lies. The third denial is even more vehement than the first two. Each lie has requires another more vehement to sustain the preceding. Fortunately the cock crows before Peter can utter anymore!

You can see Peter's fear mounting and progressing as he stands in that courtyard. He came perhaps with the intention of fulfilling what he said to Jesus when Jesus first told him he would disown him. Remember what Peter said, *"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."* (Matthew 26:35). Peter meant it when he said it, but when it came to live up to those words, his faith wasn't strong enough to stand up to the fear he felt.

Spiritual discipline

Peter's faith wasn't strong enough to stand up to the test of adverse circumstances. In the garden Jesus had warned and exhorted Peter specifically to *"watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."* (Matthew 26:41) Only a short time before had Jesus warned Peter of the coming testing and denial, Peter didn't have the spiritual discipline or faith to pray along with Jesus. If he couldn't pray then in the garden with the spiritual vigilance that requires self-control even when completely exhausted, from where would Peter draw strength of faith in the crucial moments that he denied knowing his Lord? How do we build our faith, exercise spiritual discipline to face these times of testing? Peter set himself up to fail with his brash claims of following Jesus even unto death, when he didn't have the spiritual discipline to watch and pray along side of Jesus, let alone when his time of sifting came. His ego and desires were stronger than his faith and discipline. Boasting of our abilities is an invitation to a fall.

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians likens the necessity of spiritual discipline to the discipline and training needed for a runner to run a race. In 1st century Greece athletic games were a favorite national pastime and Paul's metaphor clearly illustrates his point:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

(1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

Run the race in such a way that you attain the prize. How does one attain the prize? He trains himself. He focuses on preparing himself for the race. He doesn't become lazy; he works hard every day to prepare himself for the race. The spiritual race also requires physical discipline; it requires obedience and self control. It is the ability to deny oneself of worldly pleasures in order to keep all distractions from coming between yourself and God. What ways are you physically weak than can become a distraction to serving God? What things are you not willing to give up or turn away from when they come your way? Self discipline is a long steady course in learning new attitudes that are in opposition to our natural desires.

Peter, in his first letter written some 30 years after the events we are studying today, also has something to say about spiritual discipline and strength. (We can see from his words that his faith had strengthened and matured in the intervening years!)

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.
 1 Peter 5:6-9 (NIV)

Isn't interesting that the first thing Peter says is "*Humble yourselves*". It is the exact opposite of his behavior when Jesus warns him of the coming denials. Peter at the time boasted in his ability to follow Christ, of his own abilities. He quickly revealed he had neither the spiritual fortitude nor the fortitude of character to stand up alone in his trial. Here Peter says, humble yourself. Put yourself under God's almighty hand. "Humbly obey God regardless of present circumstances, and in his good time — either in this life or in the next — he will honor you."⁴

"*Cast all your anxieties on him.*" He says pray, give over your anxieties to God. Let him deal with your anxieties. Carrying your worries, stresses, and daily struggles by yourself shows that you have not trusted God fully with your life. It takes humility, however, to recognize that God cares, to admit your need, and to let others in God's family help you. Sometimes we think that struggles caused by our own sin and foolishness are not God's concern. But when we turn to God in repentance, he will bear the weight even of those struggles. Letting God have your anxieties calls for action, not passivity. "Don't submit to circumstances, but to the Lord who controls circumstances."⁵

Be self-controlled and alert. *Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*" If Peter had known back in the garden what he knows now things may have gone differently, Yet would God have been able to use him so magnificently? "Lions attack sick, young, or straggling animals; they choose victims who are alone or not alert. Peter warns us to watch out for Satan when we are suffering or being persecuted. Feeling alone, weak, helpless, and cut off from other believers, so focused on our troubles that we forget to watch for danger, we are especially vulnerable to Satan's attacks. During times of suffering, seek other Christians for support. Keep your eyes on Christ, and resist the devil."⁶

Clearly in the intervening years, Peter had come along way in the maturation of his faith. But we must return to the Peter of 30 years earlier and the events surrounding the sifting and stumbling. Returning to our passage in Matthew 26: 74, "*Immediately the rooster crowed*". Peter immediately knew what he had done, just as Jesus told him he would do. The next verse tells us "*And he went outside and wept bitterly.*" Despite his protestations to Jesus that he would never forsake him, he had just done so three times, publicly he denied his Lord three times. He is filled with remorse and regret. He departs the courtyard weeping bitterly, already showing remorse for his actions. We know Peter repented. We know that God used him amazingly in the early years of the church. God redeemed Peter's failures and made of him someone who could not only understand the cost of discipleship, but also teach others to truly follow Christ where ever he leads.

⁴ Life Application Bible Notes

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.