

# The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

## Chapter 6: Peter Denies Christ Three Times

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And as Peter was beneath in the palace, there cometh one of the maids of the high priest: And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked upon him, and said, "And thou also wast with Jesus of Nazareth." But he denied, saying, "I know not, neither understand I what thou sayest." And he went out into the porch; and the cock crew. (Mark 14:66-68)

And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple: that disciple was known unto the high priest, and went in with Jesus into the palace of the high priest. But Peter stood at the door without. Then went out that other disciple, which was known unto the high priest, and spake unto her that kept the door, and brought in Peter. Then saith the damsel that kept the door unto Peter, "Art not thou also one of this man's disciples?" He saith, "I am not." And the servants and officers stood there, who had made a fire of coals; for it was cold: and they warmed themselves: and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself. (John 18:15-18)

And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, "This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the man." And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, "Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech betrayeth thee." Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, "I know not the man." And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, "Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice." And he went out, and wept bitterly. (Matthew 26:71-75)

### Introduction

In the midst of our Lord's trial, each of the four gospels pause to examine the denials of Peter the apostle. This placement of the narrative is done for two reasons. First, the denials occurred throughout the proceedings of the Sanhedrin. Luke's account gives us the best time indicators. Some time after coming into the courtyard there is a denial (22:57); then Luke says "after a little while" there is a second denial (22:58). The third denial is said to occur "after a space of about one hour" (22:59). Second, the complete failure of Peter is set before us in sharp contrast to the perfect obedience, courage and faithfulness of the Savior. The gospels repeatedly emphasize that while we are weak and unable to save ourselves or even cooperate in our redemption, Christ is set forth as the Rock—the Captain of our salvation.

### Preliminary Considerations

As we examine these narratives there are some general things that merit our attention. First, the denials of Peter follow an incremental scale of challenge and disobedience. The first challenge is made by a slave girl, a doorkeeper (Jn. 18:16-17). The use of female servants as doorkeepers was apparently common among the wealthy in the ancient world. To this challenge Peter says, "I am not" (Jn. 18:17), or, "Woman, I do not know Him" (Lk. 22:57). After a brief time Peter moves out to the gateway and is confronted by a girl (Mt. 26:71) and at least one man

(Lk. 22:58). “Here the charge is that Peter belonged to the group of Jesus’ disciples. The ‘you’ is emphatic.”<sup>1</sup> Here Peter goes beyond his first denial in two ways. First, he denies the Lord with an oath. This was a very serious sin. He swore to God that he did not know the Nazarene. We can sense desperation and fear in Peter’s words. Second, in order to emphasize his denial he deliberately uses the impersonal “the man.” “The Son of Man has become to the first of the disciples an anonymous ‘the man.’”<sup>2</sup> In the third challenge the apostle is confronted not by one or two people but by a group together (“they,” Mk. 14:70; Mt. 26:73). This group was led by a close relative of Malchus, the servant of the high priest who said, “Did I not see you in the garden with Him” (Jn. 18:26)? Matthew’s account says, “Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you” (26:73). At this point Peter feels trapped and, in his panic, he boldly “began to curse and swear, saying, ‘I do not know the Man’” (Mt. 26:74)! The apostle is so desperate and defensive, he is either calling down God’s wrath upon himself if his statement to the inquirers is not true; or, he may even be calling down curses upon Jesus to prove he is not a disciple. In order to save his own skin, he in effect joins himself to this demonic rabble, the enemies of Christ, many of whom participated in His arrest. Oh, what a grievous sin!

Second, who is the unnamed disciple who spoke to the gatekeeper securing Peter’s entrance into the courtyard (see Jn. 18:16)? There has been a lot of speculation regarding the identity of this “other disciple.” Many excellent scholars and commentators believe it was none other than the apostle John, the writer of the gospel who mentions the incident. In favor of this view it is argued that the details regarding Peter in the courtyard seem to imply it. John’s identity is veiled to a certain degree in his own gospel (cf. 1:27; 13:23; 21:24). This account follows the close association elsewhere between Peter and John. The phrase “known to the high priest” does not mean personal friend but merely an acquaintance. Further, there is evidence that “John the son of Zebedee had priestly connections. His mother was Salome, the sister of the Virgin Mary...; and Mary was a kinswoman (*sungenis*, Lk. 1:36) of Elizabeth, who was ‘of the daughters of Aaron’ (Lk. 1:5). Hence John was connected with a priestly family on his mother’s side, and there is no improbability in his being ‘known to the high priest.’”<sup>3</sup>

The position that it was not John is best represented by Arthur W. Pink. He says that:

...it is almost certain that he was *not* John. In the first place, John was a poor fisherman of Galilee—far removed from Jerusalem—therefore it is most unlikely that *he* was on sufficiently intimate terms with the high priest as to enter his house, and have authority over the door-keeper so as to order her to admit Peter. In the second place, John, being a Galilean, would have been recognized and challenged as was Peter (Matt. 26:69, 73). In the third place, whenever John refers to himself in this Gospel it is always as “the disciple *whom Jesus loved*” (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). Finally, Acts 4:13 makes it very plain that the high priest was *not* personally acquainted with either Peter or John! Who, then, was this “other disciple”? The answer is, We do not know. It may have been Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathaea, but we cannot be sure.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, 564.

<sup>2</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 806.

<sup>3</sup> J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, 2:593.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:178.

## Lessons Learned from Peter's Failure

As we turn our attention to the story of Peter's denial of His Lord and Savior there are a number of important things to consider for our sanctification: (1) the root cause of Peter's fall; (2) the immediate cause of Peter's failure; (3) the look of Jesus toward His fallen disciple; and, (4) the place of Peter's denial in the humiliation and suffering of Christ.

(1) The root causes of Peter's sin were many. First, there was Peter's pride and self-confidence. After our Lord warned the apostle that he would deny Him three times Peter boasted, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble" (Mt. 26:33). "If I have to die with You, I will not deny You" (Mk. 14:31). The Bible repeatedly warns us not to place too much confidence in our own abilities. As Paul writes, "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). Peter's overconfidence led him into an area of temptation that he was not able to handle. "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18; cf. 18:12; Isa. 10:33). Peter could have avoided sin by being humble, by not trusting in his own abilities, by being sober and cautious. But, the apostle was brash, reckless and proud and rushed headlong into severe temptation and sin. Spurgeon writes, "Oh, that we might look to the roots of bitter flowers, and destroy them! If presumption is flourishing in the soil of our hearts to-day, we shall soon see the evil fruit which will come of it. Reliance upon our firmness of character, depth of experience, clearness of insight, or maturity in grace, will in the end land us in disgraceful failure. We must either deny ourselves, or we shall deny our Lord; if we cleave to self-confidence, we shall not cleave to him."<sup>5</sup> "This fall of Peter is doubtless intended to be a lesson to the whole Church of Christ. It is recorded for our learning, that we [may] be kept from like sorrowful overthrow. It is a beacon mercifully set up in Scripture, to prevent others making shipwreck. It shows us the danger of pride and self-confidence. If Peter had not been so sure that although all denied Christ, he never would, he would probably never have fallen."<sup>6</sup>

This warning against pride goes completely contrary to our youth-obsessed culture where self-esteem, self-confidence and pride are emphasized as the greatest of virtues. The problem with the church and society today is not a lack of self-esteem but a lack of godly humility. In a nation that worships sports figures, movie stars, models and the rich and successful, there is a sinful admiration of self-reliance and self-confidence. If we follow this worldly spirit and become overconfident and careless, we will fall flat on our faces spiritually. Let us learn the lesson of Peter, be humble and avoid places of temptation even when we think the danger is small.

Second, there was Peter's failure to listen to the Word of God. When Jesus told the disciples about their coming fall at the holy supper, it was not merely to satisfy their curiosity. Although the prophetic word does serve to authenticate a prophet when that word comes to pass (1 Kg. 17:24), prophecy also serves an ethical purpose. A divine warning concerning sin, failure and calamity is intended to bring humility, remorse, caution and repentance to the people of God. When Jonah preached the word to Nineveh, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jon. 3:4), the city repented in sackcloth and ashes with fasting (Jon. 3:5-9); and, "God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it" (Jon. 3:10).

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<sup>5</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Peter's Restoration" in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 34:397.

<sup>6</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:255.

Peter should have listened to the inspired words from the Master and been extra diligent to avoid any occasion of temptation.

Many professing Christians suffer from the same great error as Peter. They listen to the Word of God but they do not heed its warnings or obey its commands. The law is a light to direct our steps (cf. Prov. 6:23). However, we need to walk in the light of the Lord (Isa. 2:5) if we are to avoid the darkness. Peter was warned from the lips of the Son of God Himself. Sadly, however, he was blinded by pride. Often, it is when we are full of pride and pragmatism that we do not listen to God's Word. "When we *disregard* both the Word and warning providence of God, we must not be surprised if He then sets a snare for us. When we *insist on* having our own way, we must be prepared if God gives us up to our own heart's lust (Ps. 81:12)."<sup>7</sup> People who ignore the Word are implicitly acting as though they are smarter and wiser than God. Many times it is only when we find ourselves lying face down in the dirt that we realize our supreme folly. May God open our ears to heed the lesson of Peter who denied the Lord because he ignored the Savior's words.

Third, Peter failed to prepare himself for battle when he slept instead of watching and praying with Christ. Because of what Jesus said at the holy supper regarding the disciples' coming failure; and, our Lord's repeated injunctions to watch and pray with Him, one could reasonably expect Peter and the other disciples to put on the whole armor of God in anticipation of the imminent struggle. But the apostle had not watched or prayed, for his flesh was weak. He was too fatigued, emotionally exhausted and sleepy to pray. Therefore, when the apostle was surprised by the temptation he did not have the spiritual strength to conquer it; nor had he taken the time to meditate upon what he would do if such a temptation arose. He was completely unprepared. Beloved, let us not walk into battle half-asleep without a plan of action. We must be diligent in attending the means of grace.

(2) There were also a number of factors that contributed to the immediate cause of Peter's failure. First, there was the direct influence of the devil. Jesus had warned Peter at the supper saying, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat" (Lk. 22:31). The passion would be a time of a particularly strong satanic attack. Satan wants to sift Peter like wheat. In other words the devil will have God's permission to try Peter to see if his faith in Christ is genuine or counterfeit. Is the apostle wheat (a true disciple) or chaff (a hypocrite)? Our Lord identified this period as a time when the power of darkness would be especially active (Lk. 22:53). The same type of attack (only much worse) did not have any effect upon the Savior. As the Master said, "the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me" (Jn. 14:30). But poor Peter was caught spiritually unprepared and sinned. "The sparks from Satan's flint and steel fell upon our Lord as upon water; but Peter's heart was like a tinder-box; and when the sparks fell, they found fuel there. Oh, that we may be kept from the assaults of Satan! 'Lead us not into temptation' is a necessary prayer; but the next petition is specially noteworthy—'but deliver us from the evil one.'"<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, Jesus had prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail; and, thus his fall was serious but very brief. Where would we be without the precious intercession of Christ our faithful High Priest?

Second, Peter surrounded himself with the enemies of the Savior. After the apostle gained access to the courtyard, he was standing and warming himself by the fire. During the time that our Lord was being abused by the Sanhedrin, Peter was "warming himself comfortably

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:179.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Peter's Restoration," 34:398.

among the enemies of our Lord, like one of them.”<sup>9</sup> The apostle not only made the dangerous error of deliberately placing himself in a situation of temptation, but he also surrounded himself with evil companions. These wicked men saw Peter’s face in the light of the fire and wanted to know what side Peter was on. Was he a disciple of Jesus or was he part of the crowd that rejected the truth? Peter had an excellent opportunity to confess Christ before men and stand up for his Master. But, instead, he pretended not to know Him. He in effect said, “I am not a Christian. I do not believe in this Nazarene.” He denied his precious Savior to save his skin and please the mob. Peter forgot the biblical principle that, “evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Cor. 15:33).

Tragically, the lessons of Peter’s fall have not been heeded by many professing Christians in our day. Parents often send their little ones into the state schools to be surrounded by the enemies of Jesus. As these children grow older and the temptations come, they are surrounded by the so called “hip” crowd and are asked either explicitly or implicitly: “Will you serve the Christ, the Son of God or will you follow us in the ways of the world into the pleasures of sin” (e.g., drunkenness, fornication, drugs, filthy speech, Sabbath desecration, cursing, lewd dress, disrespect of parents, etc.)? Sadly, statistics say that about two thirds of professing Christian young people (e.g., evangelicals) in this situation chooses to deny the Savior and please the ungodly crowd.

We must learn from the apostle’s fall both not to mingle with bad company and not ever to conceal our commitment to Christ. If you want to avoid temptations at work or school, then constantly be confessing Jesus by your lips and by your actions. “Lewd fellows of the baser sort” are not attracted to godliness; they are repelled by it. Loose women without morals will be repelled by a consistent walk and profession. When people pretend they do not know the Savior because they don’t want to offend co-workers or they are embarrassed by the identification “evangelical Christian,” then they have already lost the battle. The best defense is very often a good offense. Boldly and consistently proclaim your allegiance and love toward Jesus.

We live in a generation where many professors of the Savior want to have it both ways. They want the Son of God as a cosmic Santa Claus, an easy fire escape from hell; but, they also want to be of the world. They want to be popular with unbelievers. They want to enjoy the pleasures of life at the expense of fervency for Christ and His cause. They often even turn their public worship services into a worldly spectacle as if God could be worshipped by the amusements of the theater or rock concert. They are like the backslidden people in Elijah’s day who couldn’t decide whether to follow God or Baal (1 Kg. 18:21). With Elijah we could say to this present generation “How long will you falter between two opinions?” (1 Kg. 18:21). Spurgeon says that all half-hearted people really only have three choices. He writes,

There are three things you can do, and those three things I will set before you by an illustration. When you get outside the Tabernacle, there will be a tramcar. Now, go up to the car, and put one foot on the car, and keep the other foot on the ground, and if you do not come down with a smash I am very much mistaken. Yet many people try to keep in with the world and keep in with Christ, and they will never do it; but will make a terrible fall of it before long. Now, the second thing that you can do is, that you can keep standing in the world in the mud, and not get into the car at all. You can stop there, and let the tramcar go by: that is all fair and straight. If you want to live in the world, and be of the world, well, live in the world and take what pleasure it can give you and reap the fruit of it at last. But there is a third thing you can do, namely, get right off the road into the car, and let the car take you right away where it is going. Now, it is this third thing that I commend to you. Get right into Christ, and let the Lord Jesus,

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<sup>9</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:269.

by the power of his Holy Spirit, carry you right away from the unclean place where you now stand, bearing you safely along the tramlines of holiness till he brings you to the terminus of glory at his own right hand.<sup>10</sup>

Third, Peter was guilty of cowardice. The brave Peter, who had bragged that he was willing to die with Jesus, wilted before his Master's enemies. The great apostle's faith failed him. He was not focusing on Christ and His precious prayers and promises, but rather was thinking about what would happen to him if he was discovered. This story reminds us of when Peter was bold and brave enough to step out of the boat onto the stormy waters of Galilee to meet his Savior. "But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out saying, 'Lord save me!'" (Mt. 15:30). Peter knew that Jesus was all alone. He could hear the trial being conducted in the palace. Perhaps not understanding the great humiliation that the Messiah must undergo, his faith wavered. In any case, we must understand the amazing degree of weakness that is found even in godly men. Further, note the deceitfulness of man's heart! "It is 'exceedingly corrupt. Who can know it' (Jer. 17:9)... Think of it: 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God'—'I don't know the man.'"<sup>11</sup>

There can be no question regarding Peter's love toward his Master. Had he not given up all to follow Christ? Did he not just risk his life when he sliced off the servant of the high priest's ear? He went to the palace to see if anything could be done. He entered the courtyard out of a true interest in the Lord's safety. Yet, he played the coward, was ashamed and discouraged. Beloved, no matter how strong our past walk with the Savior has been, there never is a time when we can let down our guard. "Therefore, let him who thinks he stand take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

(3) After Peter's third denial two things occurred virtually simultaneously that caught Peter's attention, brought him back to spiritual reality and pierced his soul—the crowing of the rooster (Mk. 14:72; Mt. 26:7; Lk. 22:60; Jn. 18:27) and the look of the Savior (Lk. 22:61). Luke's account says, "But Peter said, 'Man I do not know what you are saying!' Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.' So Peter went out and wept bitterly" (Lk. 22:60-62). There are a number of things in this passage that we should note for our edification.

First, we see the amazing love and mercy of Jesus for His own people even in the midst of intense suffering. Our Lord had prayed for Peter. He had warned him with prophecy regarding his coming fall and then, after the apostle fell, Christ guided him back to the fold with a look. Even though Peter had disowned his Lord by his denials, the Savior never disowned Peter. Christ, according to His sovereign providence, timed Peter's final and worst denial with the crow of the rooster and at that precise moment He turned His head to look at Peter. Jesus sent out His heart love to Peter by a look. In the midst of intense suffering, with His face black and blue, swollen and bleeding from the blows, with spit dripping off His face, the Son of God looks at Peter with sadness. There was an unfathomable love in the eyes of the Savior.

This incident is important for what it tells us about the love and mercy of Christ. Jesus is in the place of judgment. He has just been convicted of a death penalty offense for which he is totally innocent. He has just suffered a severe beating with insults, mocking and blasphemous jesting. He is being led away to a holding cell while the conspirators plan His crucifixion and

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<sup>10</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "In the Garden with Him," 35:518-519.

<sup>11</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 937.

what does our blessed Lord concern Himself with? Our Lord is thinking about his fallen disciple. Even in the midst of intense suffering, the Master is completely focused on helping His sheep, those for whom He is about to shed His own blood. “Though now he reigns in glory, he still looks steadily upon his own: his delight is in them, and his care is over them. There was not a particle of selfishness about our Savior.”<sup>12</sup>

The look of Jesus tells us that His love of the sheep is very personal. It is a particular love. There is a popular system of theology today that says that Christ did not suffer and die for particular individuals but for an impersonal mass of humanity, most of whom will not believe and will go to hell forever. This doctrine called Arminianism or semi-Pelagianism cannot account for the very personal, efficacious love that is exhibited here. The love of Christ toward those whom the Father has given Him is greater than the love a mother has for her children. It is infinitely greater than the love a man and woman can have or ever will have for each other. “The love of Christ towards His people, is a deep well that has no bottom.... It exceeds all other love, as far as the sun exceeds the rushlight.”<sup>13</sup> It is a love that reaches out and saves sinners from themselves. It is a love that doesn’t make salvation possible, but actually accomplishes it. It is a love that doesn’t wait for helpless sinners to attempt to save themselves or to cooperate with God. But rather, it powerfully and mercifully deals with us as our Lord dealt with Peter. Beloved, we can safely place our trust in Jesus as both the one who died in our place; and, also as a faithful high priest who with a loving eye continually watches over us. “Christ takes more notice of what we say and do than we think he does.”<sup>14</sup> Yes, even when we fall the Savior looks on us with tenderness and compassion, to direct us back to the path of faithfulness. Let us not be afraid to trust that love when we confess our sins. “No man need despair, however far he may have fallen, if he will only repent and turn to Christ. If the heart of Jesus was so gracious when He was a prisoner in the judgment hall, we surely need not think it is less gracious, when He sits in glory at the right hand of God.”<sup>15</sup>

This section of Scripture was especially important in the early church where persecution for one’s faith in Christ was an ever present reality. Although Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, Rome was responsible for beheading the chief apostles and plunging the whole Roman church into a baptism of blood. Multitudes of believers were murdered under Nero by beheading, crucifixion, being burned alive and killed by wild beasts. Many professing Christians under these circumstances had denied their relationship to Jesus to save themselves from death. Could such people repent and be readmitted into the visible church after such a heinous sin? The story of Peter’s fall and restoration teaches us that sincere repentance can lead to a full restoration. While Peter’s fall can never and should never be used as an excuse for sin, it does teach us that the Savior lovingly readmits straying sheep back into the fold. Peter’s bitter experience teaches both how to avoid falling into sin and what to do if we should fall.

Second, we see the power of Christ to redeem in this look. The Savior had looked upon many people during His ministry. He had even looked upon Annas and Caiaphas during the trial. But when Christ looked upon Peter, the look was attended by the piercing of the soul by the Holy Spirit. The Master’s look of deep affection was accompanied by the convicting and convincing power of His Spirit. The gospels tell us that when the rooster crowed and Christ looked, that Peter remembered what Jesus had said. The apostle was enlightened and understood the exact

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<sup>12</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Peter’s Restoration,” 34:399-400.

<sup>13</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:438.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:818.

<sup>15</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:438.

correspondence between the prophecy and its perfect fulfillment. The Holy Spirit stirred the apostle's heart to reflect on the Word of the Master and repent with tears. When Christ looks upon a sinner with a saving love, there is an efficacy that is irresistible. There is a divine operation on the heart that causes the sinner to see his sins as they truly are. Our Lord "looks into the secret chambers of the soul; for his look is a sunbeam, and bears its own light with it, lighting up the dark places of our nature by its own radiance."<sup>16</sup> Peter was brought to repentance by the loving gaze of Christ and the heart-piercing arrows of the Spirit. "Do you know anything of the secret love-look of the Lord Jesus?"<sup>17</sup> Whenever we fall into sin we must pray that our Lord will look upon us with love and mercy attended by the secret efficacy of the Spirit. Let us therefore always remember that whenever any of us have fallen, our sincere repentance will never begin until Jesus looks at us as He looked on Peter. With such infinite love can any of us doubt our Savior's ability and desire to save us?<sup>18</sup> He holds us in His very hands and He promises us that not one of us will be lost (Jn. 6:37, 39; 10:28, 29).

Third, this incident tells us a lot about biblical repentance. In this amazing scene we observe the Savior working upon Peter and see the fallen apostle's biblical response. We have seen how God used the special working of providence in the timing of the last denial with the crow of the rooster and the look of the Savior. We have also noted how the external means were accompanied by the working of the Holy Spirit, by special efficacious grace. "Power went along with this look, to change the heart of Peter to bring him to himself, to his *right mind*."<sup>19</sup> The Holy Spirit enlightened Peter's mind to the workings of divine providence and pointed his heart to the words of Christ. Now let us examine what Peter did as a result of God's grace.

a) Peter looked to Christ with the eye of faith. The Savior's look toward Peter was an instrument used by the Spirit to revive and strengthen Peter's looking toward the Savior. Although the apostle had warmed himself around the fire with the enemies of our Lord and even denied Him three times, the embers of faith were still burning in his breast. He still had the habit of looking to Jesus. Despite his severe and sudden backsliding, he was still trusting in Christ and looking toward Him. Therefore, when the Master turned and looked at Peter, their eyes met and the apostle's heart was pierced.

When you backslide and fall into sin there is great hope for you if you look to Christ with faith. You must trust in His imputed righteousness and His victory over the power of sin in your life. The Savior is the fountain or source of our sanctification. If Peter had had his back turned to the Lord and instead was looking upon the vanities of life, the mocking crowd or the wicked world, he would not have been affected by the Savior's loving look. He would not have had his heart pierced by the arrow of the High Priest's efficacious stare.

Those backsliders who are comfortable in their sins, who have their back turned toward Christ, who are mesmerized with the lust of the eyes and the pride of life are in great danger of total apostasy. Pray that God would increase your faith so that you would never take your eyes off Jesus, even for a moment. Peter's fall was short-lived because faith and a continuous life of scandalous sin are such enemies. Peter loved His precious Lord; "his denial was not of the heart, but of the tongue; and, therefore, as all the grounds of his faith came before his mind anew, his

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<sup>16</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Peter's Restoration," 34:405.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> See John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:265.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:818.

heart was broken into a thousand pieces with grief that he should have been false to such a friend.”<sup>20</sup>

b) Peter remembered the words of Jesus. If we are to avoid a fall or be restored from a fall we must remember the Word of God. The Holy Spirit turns us from sin by recalling the Word to our mind, by applying it to our conscience, causing us to loathe our sinful behavior so that we will turn from it to obedience. The Holy Spirit didn't simply zap Peter in some mystical sense causing him to repent; He worked in and by the Word. As Jesus said, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). If we read and study our Bibles everyday and memorize the sections of it that apply to our weak areas, then we are helping our own sanctification. By doing this, we are placing more of God's precious Word in our hearts to be used by the Holy Spirit. David understood this principle when he said, “How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.... Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.... I will meditate on Your precepts.... I will delight myself in your statutes; I will not forget Your word.... Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law.... Revive me according to Your word.... Make me understand the way of your precepts” (Ps. 119:9, 1, 15, 25, 27). Sanctification and growth in grace involves reading, studying, meditating upon and remembering God's Word. “As the forgetting of the Lord's word opens the door to temptation, so the calling of it to remembrance, mixed with faith, is a means of repentance.”<sup>21</sup> If we are always looking to Christ, then we must always be remembering His Word. It is the Scriptures alone which show us the Master. If we neglect or deny the Bible, then we will neglect and deny the Son of God.

c) Peter went out and wept bitterly (Lk. 22:63; Mt. 26:73; Mk. 14:72). Sincere repentance is accompanied by godly sorrow. “He found out by experience the truth of Jeremiah's word, ‘It is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord’ (Jer. ii. 19). He felt keenly the truth of Solomon saying, ‘The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways’ (Prov. xiv. 14) No doubt he could have said with Job, ‘I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes’ (Job xlii. 6).”<sup>22</sup>

When a true Christian falls into sin it brings great sorrow. This sorrow no doubt was magnified in Peter because of his strong personal relationship with Christ and his position of great responsibility. The apostle who was designated the rock because of his great confession and his unique place in the Jerusalem church had been unable to face the prospect of a suffering Messiah. The man who had walked on the water toward Jesus had disowned his own Master three times with cursing and swearing. The apostle who had been challenged to take up his cross and be willing to lose his life for the Savior failed miserably. Peter the chief apostle who had boasted of his willingness and ability to die with his Master denies his Lord in the face of one powerless girl. What a fall!

When Peter had his mind awakened to his sin by the Holy Spirit, all of this and more pierced his heart and he went out and wept bitterly. Peter went out into the cold, dark night to find a place where he could weep alone and confess his sins to Jesus. “Peter's repentance was secret; he sought a place of retirement where he might mourn unseen. Solitariness is most agreeable to an afflicted spirit.”<sup>23</sup> “The strong man would bow in agony.... But the agony would do him good forever. The ‘rock’ was stricken within it. To and fro it rocked, and then burst, and

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<sup>20</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Peter's Restoration,” 34:403.

<sup>21</sup> David Dickson, *Matthew*, 379.

<sup>22</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:439.

<sup>23</sup> Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 645.

melted, and flowed. Oh how gladly would he have wept, if he could, a whole sea of salt tears!”<sup>24</sup> “Dear friends, if we have sinned with Peter, God grant us grace to weep with Peter. Many will think of Peter’s wandering who forget Peter’s weeping. Sin, even though it be forgiven, is a bitter thing; even though Christ may look away your despair, he will not look away your penitence.”<sup>25</sup>

A genuine believer can never make peace with sin because his regenerate heart is constantly afflicted by it. When David repented of his sin with Bathsheba he said, “I acknowledged my transgressions and my sin is always before me.... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise” (Ps. 51:3, 17). When the Holy Spirit shows us the heinousness of our sin before God, then we are broken before Him. We confess our sins and forsake them. We acknowledge that what we did was wrong and against God. We ask God to forgive all of our sins. And, we ask Him to enable us to avoid these sins in the future. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9).

The man or woman who is mired in scandalous sin, who is not deeply troubled by it and therefore continues in it, is not a Christian. “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (1 Jn. 1:6). “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God” (1 Jn. 3:9). There are many professing Christians in our day who regard sin as a minor thing. They make peace with the flesh, with sin and the world. They do not flee out of Sodom or Egypt, but rather cling to their lusts. They have fallen for the false gospel of easy believism—that a person can accept Jesus as Savior, yet refuse to submit to Him as Lord. While it is indeed true that repentance from sin does not save us, for we are redeemed by Christ alone through faith alone; nevertheless, everyone who truly believes in Christ will repent of his sins. “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:3, 5). Repentance means that “a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 15:2).

Do you recognize sin for what it really is? Do you hate your sin as an offense against God? Are you willing to forsake your sin and turn to God? Do you have a desire to obey Christ and all His commandments? As believers we are required to die daily (1 Cor. 15:31). Because we are still sinners, repentance from sin as an aspect of our sanctification must be a life-long, habitual practice. Every single day we need to examine our thoughts, words and actions in light of God’s Word and confess, forsake and endeavor after a greater obedience unto God.

There is a great difference between the godly sorrow of Peter that accompanied genuine repentance and remorse such as that experienced by Judas. Many people who are not saved feel regret or sorrow over evil acts that they have committed, but such anguish has nothing to do with biblical repentance. A person may be sorry because of the consequences of sin, yet not truly hate sin. Hitler, no doubt, was sorry he invaded Russia. Judas was very remorseful about what his betrayal did to Christ. However, neither of these men turned toward God, hated sin as violation against God’s throne or desired to obey God’s commandments. Sorrow must be accompanied by a turning to God. “The falls of a graceless professor are falls from which there is no rising again.

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<sup>24</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 565.

<sup>25</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Peter’s Resoration,” 34:407.

But the fall of a true saint always ends in deep contrition, self-abasement, and amendment of life.”<sup>26</sup>

Beloved, let us learn by Peter’s example that sin leads to pain and sorrow. People sin because they think it is fun and that it brings joy to the heart. But, even though sin may be sweet to the taste at first, it eventually will become very bitter to the soul. Every great servant of God who yielded to temptation and fell into scandalous sin eventually shed many tears. Let us avoid temptation and sin in the first place to avoid the agony of offending our precious Savior.

(4) Peter’s denial of Christ increases the humiliation and suffering of the Savior. Peter’s denial occurs in the passion narrative not merely to serve as a contrast to the Messiah’s perfect obedience, faithfulness and courage or as a moral lesson to believers on carelessness or repentance. It is an important aspect in our Lord’s suffering itself. As Jesus moves toward Golgotha, God is isolating Him from any comfort and increasing His suffering. In Gethsemane the disciples fail to watch and pray with their Master. Then, at the arrest, they all abandon Him to save their own skin. Finally, Peter does not simply abandon, but also forsakes the Master three separate times with an oath and curses. When the disciples fled they did not verbally repudiate or curse their Master. They were showing cowardice and disloyalty only implicitly. But Peter repudiates his Lord with curses and oaths. Schilder writes,

When Christ must plunge into a deep recess of the abyss of curse and death—and this is intentional on heaven’s part—Peter is brought into His way, and made to swear in Jesus’ hearing: Who is that stranger? I do not know the man.... That precious sworn oath is what thrust Him, as the bearer of God’s office, farther into the abyss than anything else in Peter’s denial.... There are two kinds of denials: a denial with, and a denial without, the oath. The two are not equally severe. When Simon Peter denies Jesus by means of an outright disclaimer, he has loosened his hold of Jesus’ soul. But when the oath is added, and the self-condemnation, then the basic concept of Christ’s *office* is also being rejected. The denial taken simply as a denial separates Peter from Jesus’ existence. But the denial accompanied by the oath is repudiation of the purpose of Christ’s existence, and a disavowal of the *raison d’ etre* of the Christ.<sup>27</sup>

At this point, almost immediately before being sent to Pilate, the Lord’s isolation from His friends and disciples reaches its ultimate point. He is not only abandoned, but abandoned with an oath.

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[HOME PAGE](#)

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<sup>26</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:439.

<sup>27</sup> Klaas Schilder, *Christ on Trial*, 202, 207, 208.