

36. The Three-Time Denial of Peter John 18:15-27

Warm-Up Question: Who did you admire as you grew up? What character qualities in that person would you like to emulate?

I had big questions when I was in my late teens as many people do. It was a time of soul-searching. The questions were similar to the ones that other people of the same age in my town were asking, but nobody seemed to have the answers. The questions were all about life. Who was I? Where was I going? What is happening on planet Earth? What am I created for? Is there a God, and if so, what on earth is He doing? Why does He let bad things happen?

I committed myself to a spiritual quest to find the answers. I was blessed with money and time. Working with my father as a commercial fisherman enabled me to earn a very good salary for my young age. As long as I had somebody to work in my place for a few months, my father would let me wander off and travel the world for a while until I was ready to come home. I traveled to five different continents in search of “the meaning of life” and in search of myself.

The result of all of that searching culminated in an act of surrender when I gave my life to Jesus Christ. In discovering what I had found to be the truth in the person of Christ, I felt that my search was finally at an end. Looking back now, I realize that this discovery was just the beginning. From that point I found myself propelled upon a search to know more of Christ, and as I did so, I found my values and habits slowly changing. Within a few years, I felt a call of God to leave my commercial fishing business with my father when God spoke to me from this scripture:

¹⁸As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹*Come, follow me*, Jesus said, *and I will make you* fishers of men. ²⁰At once they left their nets and followed him (Matthew 4:18-20).

If I were to ask you what those words of Jesus meant, you would probably say that Jesus was calling two fishermen, Simon and Andrew, to catch men instead of fish, and you would be partly right, but there are four words in that statement that capture what Jesus does with all of us who have dedicated our lives to follow Him. These are the words: *I will make you*. His appeal to the fishermen was to *come* to Him, follow Him, and in the process of following Him, He would be working in their lives to *make them* fishers of men.

The Process of Transformation

If I asked you what you make in your work, for example if you were an artist, you would probably respond saying that you were in the business of making paintings. If you were a baker, you may respond by saying that you make bread. All of us are making something with our lives. I am in the business of speaking and writing in the hope that I am a tool in the Lord’s hand to make disciples. What Christ does is to make transformed, empowered disciples. Disciples are

primarily learners and followers, people who have abandoned their old lives to follow Christ and live their lives in submission to Him and His kingdom purposes.

Let's look at another scripture that will help us understand what God is doing in our lives:

²⁹For those God foreknew he also **predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son** (Romans 8:29).

If life is just about finding Christ, why doesn't He take us home when Jesus has found residence in our lives? Is there something more to life than just finding Christ?

There is something more that I have found since walking with Christ for these past thirty-six years. God uses the rest of our lives to transform us from the inside in order to make us more like Him. Paul talks about this process as something that starts slowly and increases with time as we are consistently obedient to the Spirit of God.

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The Greek word *metamorphoō* is the word that is translated with our English word "transformed." It means "a change of place, condition or form. To transform, transmute, to alter fundamentally. Used of spiritual transformation, it is an invisible process in Christians. This change takes place during our lives in this age."¹ John the Apostle also speaks of this change that God is bringing about within us:

²Dear friends, now we are children of God, and **what we will be has not yet been made known**. But we know that when he appears, **we shall be like him**, for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

J.R. Miller wrote, "The only thing that walks back from the tomb with the mourners and refuses to be buried is the character of a man. What a man is, survives him. It can never be buried."² Henry Ward Beecher put it this way: "Happiness is not the end of life; character is." Once we become Christians, God is at work in our lives to make us into people of character, and our character is measured by our responses to life's trials and difficulties. Thomas Chalmers also wrote about character this way: "The character wherewith we sink into the grave at death is the very character wherewith we shall appear at the resurrection."

Over the years since my call to give myself fully to the work of God, I have trained and helped many leaders into full time and lay leadership. The bigger the church, the more leaders are needed to be called, trained and equipped. Often people do not consider themselves to be leaders, and so it comes as a shock to them when I have asked them to be a group leader. When I look for leaders, the first thing I look for is love toward God and love toward people. Most everything else can be taught. I also want to see that a person can take risks, and that he or she has an

¹ Key Word Study Bible, AMG Publishers, 3565 Metamorphoō, page 1651.

² As quoted in Twelve Ordinary Men, John MacArthur, Page 47, W Publishing Group.

outward focused heart. However, the questions that are before us today are; how does God **make us** to be men and women of God and how can we cooperate with Him? How does God shape a man or women's character and prepare him for eternity? Our passage in the book of John about Peter will help us to see how God works.

When Christ called Simon Peter, He saw that he had that raw leadership gifting in his spiritual DNA. Peter would take risks that others would not take. We see him getting out of the boat at Jesus' command to walk on water (Matthew 14:30). He showed his courage when he attacked the high priest's servant Malchus in Gethsemane to try to keep Jesus from being captured (John 18:10). We also see his obedience toward Christ when Jesus told him to push his boat out into deep water for a catch of fish. He did so, even though he believed that it was impossible because they did not catch that kind of fish during the day there in the Sea of Galilee. (Luke 5:4).

What character qualities or traits in a leader helps you to trust them?

Although Peter often showed great faith and was not afraid to risk, there were other characteristics that had to be refined if Peter was ever to be the man that God needed as a pillar of the New Testament church. There were big plans ahead for Peter, and the Lord had to work in his life to make him fit for the task ahead. The flaws that hindered Peter's spiritual growth were his lack of humility and his arrogance, which were demonstrated in his rash and impulsive words and actions. It is likely that Peter was the one that instigated the dispute that went on at the Last Supper as to who was the greatest. **Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered the greatest (Luke 22:24).** Maybe Peter was upset because Judas had gained the seat alongside Jesus at the table. Certainly, Judas was near enough for Jesus to hand him a piece of bread (John 13:26), so it is likely that Judas was seated in the place of honor to the left of the Master. Right after this dispute at the Last Supper table, Jesus told Peter that the enemy would shake his faith:

³¹"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. ³²But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." ³³But he replied, **"Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."** ³⁴Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me" (Luke 22:31-34).

These words are difficult to read. It tells us that Satan had demanded (the word *asked* in the Greek is very forceful) to separate the wheat from the chaff among the disciples (the word *you* in verse 31 is in the plural) in a spiritual sifting process. Satan saw Peter as chaff and had asked Christ for permission to "fling him on the rubbish heap," as this is what happens to chaff. Because of Christ's desire to use Peter, He allowed Satan to challenge Peter's faith.

What was the Lord's purpose by allowing this test? It was necessary for Peter to be broken in order for him to see his character flaws. The test would demonstrate what Peter was made of when none of his friends were around, when the other disciples were not looking. D.L. Moody once said, "Character is what a man is in the dark." Is it possible that God designs these tests for us to reveal and refine our character? Would He really go to all that trouble? Certainly we have

an example in the life of Job when Satan had asked for permission to test God's servant (Job 1:9-12). We also have an example of this in Israel's history as a nation.

²Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands (Deuteronomy 8:2).

God led the people of Israel for forty years in the desert to humble them and test them. Let me ask you a question. Does God know what was in their hearts, and yours, and my heart, too? Of course He does! So is the test for His benefit or mine? The God of heaven wants us to see ourselves the way He sees us. Only when we see our true state will we cooperate with Him in striving to overcome our sin nature and walk closely, hand in hand with Him. The test is designed by God to show me something about myself that I do not see up to the point of the test.

Can you think of any event that has been life changing to you, and that has brought about changes in your character, or a turnaround?

People cannot be open to the Spirit's work of transformation until they see themselves as God sees them. When Peter responded to Christ's prophetic word about being sifted by Satan, he responded in his usual rash fashion, saying that he was ready to go to prison and even to his death for Christ. Peter was not aware of his spiritual weaknesses and flaws. There was no talking to Peter about this. He disbelieved Christ's prophetic words by self-confidently affirming that he had the strength of character to follow all the way. He was so sure of himself.

The Testing of Peter's Faith

With that introduction in mind, let us now read our passage in John and see how God breaks the heart of Peter and allows him to see his own character flaws:

¹⁵Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, ¹⁶but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in. ¹⁷"You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" she asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." ¹⁸It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself. ¹⁹Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. ²⁰"I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret." ²¹Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said." ²²When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded. ²³"If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" ²⁴Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. ²⁵Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So they asked him, "You aren't one of his disciples too, are you?" He denied it, saying, "I am not." ²⁶One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged

him, "Didn't I see you with him in the garden?" ²⁷Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow (John 18:15-27).

It was probably around midnight when Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane. He was bound and then taken back across the Kidron brook to the High Priest's palace situated to the south west of the Temple Mount. This large enclosure of buildings with a courtyard in the midst likely housed both Annas and Caiaphas who are both named High Priests in the New Testament. To hold the office of High Priest of Israel was similar to being the king of the nation at that time. Annas was High Priest from A.D. 6-15 and was succeeded by his son-in-law Caiaphas, who held office until A.D. 36/37. The Old Testament decreed that the office was for the life of the man (Numbers 35:25), so Annas was the real power at the head of the corrupt priesthood. His son-in-law Caiaphas had been put in power by the Roman procurator Gratus, the man in charge before Pontius Pilate.

John tells us that Jesus was led first of all to the house of Annas (John 18:16). Peter followed at a distance from what Matthew called "a large crowd" (Matthew 26:47). Picture with me, these men in procession as they wind their way down the Kidron valley with lanterns and torches. The distance was no more than approximately a mile from Gethsemane to the palace complex of Annas and Caiaphas.

[What do you think was going through Peter's mind as he followed at a distance?](#)

His pride may have been hurt due to Christ's rebuke after cutting off the ear of the High Priest's servant. He also may have been wondering why Christ had allowed them to take Him, especially as Jesus had put this detachment of around six hundred on the floor with His words "I Am." His heart must have sunk as he saw that Jesus was being taken to the High Priest's household, especially after he had attacked the High Priest's servant with a sword and cut off his ear. He may have been fearful of death at the hand of the soldiers. In his narrative, John tells us of a disciple that was known to the High Priest who was allowed to enter through the gate. All evidence of who this disciple was points to the person of John himself. How could the High Priest and his staff know a fisherman? Some say that because John's father, Zebedee, had a business on the Sea of Galilee with many servants working with his sons on the boats (See Mark 1:20). It is possible that Zebedee supplied the High Priest's household with salted fish from Galilee and that John the apostle was often the one that brought the fish down to Jerusalem. I note that it is only John that records the name of Malchus, one of the High Priest's servants.

¹⁵Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, ¹⁶but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in. ¹⁷"You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." ¹⁸It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself (John 18:15-18).

It was this disciple, John, that first gained entrance through the gate and went and asked permission for Peter to also be allowed in. While he waited at the gate outside, we can imagine

that Peter's heart was racing. After all, he knew that he may be seen by some of the soldiers, maybe even Malchus, who he had recently physically assaulted. What was he hoping to accomplish by being there? I will look forward to asking him that question when we see him! I think he was trying to be brave and stay with his Master. In his narrative, John contrasts the difference between the Lord Jesus' bravery and the wavering Peter. The courage of Christ before Annas and the failing Peter before a humble servant girl. As Peter is let in through the gate, notice how the enemy uses the woman at the gate to pose a question in the negative, making it easy to answer with an "I am not." Satan's temptations are always so easy to enter into, and they lead us down a path into larger and more deceitful sin, which makes it harder and harder to admit to the truth.

What had reduced the apostle Peter to deny being a disciple in front of a servant girl? Could it be that this first denial of Peter was because he was afraid that the young girl would call the soldiers and that now the door/gate was locked behind him preventing his easy escape? We cannot tell what fears were in his mind at that moment. Where was John? Perhaps he was listening to the questioning of Jesus by Annas. Let's give Peter credit that he chose to stay longer. Luke tells us that Peter sat down with a group of people warming themselves by a fire after the first denial (Luke 22:55). Apparently, the young girl did not believe Peter's first denial and came up close to see his face in the light of the fire.

The Second Denial

It seems that the second denial was more of a prolonged exchange for Matthew tells us:

⁶⁹Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. ⁷⁰But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said (Matthew 26:69-70).

Once he is in the courtyard, where else should he go but with the enemies of the Lord and warm himself beside their charcoal fire. In the Greek text, John makes a distinction to the kind of fire that is in the midst of the courtyard. It is made of charcoal. It is interesting that the denial of Christ by Peter came as he warmed himself by the fire, and his restoration by Christ also happened at a charcoal fire beside the Sea of Galilee (John 21:9). John is keen to note symbolic details such as this in his gospel. Peter's denial to those around the fire constituted his second denial. This is often the way temptation comes to us. We give the enemy an inch, and he takes a foot; give him a foot, and he takes a yard; give a yard, and he takes a mile. We must be aware not to compromise an inch of our lives to the enemy of our souls. There is nothing to tell us that the household servants would have done anything to Peter. He had been reduced to his denials out of his own fear.

While this is going on in the courtyard, John takes us to the scene before Annas, who is trying to get information out of Jesus to use in the real court hearing before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the seventy elders, set to take place in the early morning. Brutality and injustice were illegal in all court appearances, but that did not stop Annas and his men. Jesus was hit about the face because He would not be intimidated in giving information about His disciples or His teaching. Annas was looking for any information that would incriminate Christ before Pilate, but Jesus

was objecting to the line of questioning because of its illegality and to establish for the record His innocence and the High Priest and Elders' corruption. When Jesus refused to give Annas any evidence, Annas sent him over the courtyard to Caiaphas, who was getting the Sanhedrin together for the illegal court proceedings (John 18:24).

The Third Denial of Peter

The third denial of Peter happened at the very time Jesus was being led out of the house of Annas on His way to Caiaphas. At the time of the last denial, the group had a witness that made Peter completely lose his composure for John tells us:

²⁶One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?" (John 18:26).

The pressure of the witness together with a few of the servants around him made him call down curses on himself, wishing himself a violent death at God's hand if he was lying about knowing Jesus:

⁷³After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." ⁷⁴**Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them,** "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. ⁷⁵Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly (Matthew 26:73-75).

It seems that some time went by after the second denial by the fire. The third denial Luke tells us was an hour later from the second. While under pressure from the relative of Malchus, he starts to panic as he is confronted by an accusation of his Galilean accent giving him away. Luke tells us that just as Peter confesses he doesn't know Christ, he hears the cock crow and that his eyes turn and connect with Jesus as he leaves the house of Annas.

⁵⁹About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." ⁶⁰Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" **Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed.** ⁶¹**The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.** Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." ⁶²And he went outside and **wept bitterly** (Luke 22:59-62).

How painful it was to hear the cock crow and be immediately reminded of Jesus' words that before the cock crows, Peter would deny his Lord three times. I don't think there was any accusation in Jesus' eyes, only sadness for Peter. The Greek word translated "looked" is *emblepo*, which describes a fixed look, almost a stare. This look broke Peter's heart; he went outside and wept bitterly. The Greek word that is translated as *bitterly* means to have violent uncontrolled convulsive sobs, his head was bowed, and his shoulders heaving as the shame of the moment gripped his heart. An interesting point here can be made regarding the crowing of the cockerel. According to Jewish ritual law, it was not lawful to keep cockerels in the holy city,

although we cannot be sure whether that law was kept or not. Further, it is never possible to be sure that a cock will crow. But the Romans had a certain military practice. The night was divided into four watches—6 PM to 9 PM, 9 PM to 12 midnight, 12 midnight to 3 AM, and 3 AM to 6 AM. After the third watch the guard was changed and to mark the changing of the guard there was a trumpet call at 3 AM. That trumpet call was called in Latin *gallicinium* and in Greek *alektorophonia*, which both mean cock crow. It may well be that Jesus said to Peter: “Before the trumpet sounds the cock crow, you will deny me three times. That night it sounded through the city, and when it sounded Peter remembered.”³ So it is a possibility that the Lord predicted that a cockerel would crow, but it is also possible that Jesus was referring to the trumpet call. Either way, it was a prophetic insight, and a painful one.

The scripture records in detail Peter’s denial, but also his immediate repentance. Peter was broken and undone. How quickly he repented. How many of us have fallen and denied our Lord? We may not have done so with our lips in the way Peter did, but I am sure that at one time or another, we have denied Him with our actions. This passage is recorded for us in order to show us God’s mercy and complete forgiveness. The Lord often allows us to experience pain, for it is an excellent teacher.

What do you think God is teaching you through your own life experiences at this present time? Do you know what the lessons are yet?

Often, it is only when our pain makes us hit rock bottom and we are broken of our pride and self-adequacy that we are brought to a place where we look to the Rock, our Savior.

Repentance and brokenness is a good place in which to be. While we have adequate resources to fight our own battles, the Lord lets us carry on. When we are poor and broken in spirit is when we begin to look beyond ourselves to God’s mercy and grace. That is the point at which the Lord steps in to fight our battles for us. When we are weak, then we are strong (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

**The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:17).**

The place of our brokenness is the place where God can step in to save, heal and restore us. God allows such tests and trials in our lives, for He is building us for an eternity with Him. For me, my trial and test has been to seek to bring my family back to their home country, the USA. I tried so many ways to bring them home. After sixteen years of church planting in England, my wife wanted to see more of her family. God used it as a refining tool to drive me to persevere on my visa problem. I just knew inside that it was not God’s will for us to be forever barred from Sandy’s home country. I had to wait for His timing. God has used this whole issue in my life as a means to break me and bring deeper trust and dependence in my life. God’s school of training is more than Bible College, more than head knowledge. His training often includes brokenness and a contrite heart. Since my conversion to Christ in 1977 I have learned that God uses our life experiences as a school to teach us and prepare us for eternity. He molds and shapes our

³ William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of John, Published by Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Scotland. Page 229-230.

character through everyday situations. Some of them can be very trying: the death of a family member, a financial need, a sick child—the list is endless. For me, it was the need of a visa to take my loved ones home. When the right time comes and the work of God is done, then He has compassion on His servants when he sees that *their* strength is gone and they have no reserves, no hidden back up plan...just God (Deuteronomy 32:36).

In Chapter 18 of the book of Jeremiah, the prophet was taken down to the potter's house and saw the potter making a jar of clay. It was all bent out of shape and had neither beauty nor correct shape to be used. The potter took it off the wheel and started again with the pliable clay to form it into what he wanted to create. The lesson that God was teaching Jeremiah and again here with Peter was that through the brokenness, God would reshape each and every one of us. A.W. Tozer once said, "God never uses a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply."

[What tests are you going through at the moment and how can others in your small group pray for you?](#)

What the Lord needs in His making of a man or woman of God is a broken and contrite heart. What do I mean by brokenness? Brokenness is the working of God in a person's life leading to a point of abandonment of one's self to a place of complete dependence and trust in the Father's care. John Collinson, an English Vicar puts it this way:

"When to do the will of God means that even my Christian brothers will not understand and I remember that even His brothers did not understand or believe in Him, and I bow my head to obey and accept the misunderstanding, this is brokenness. When I am misrepresented, or deliberately misinterpreted, and I remember that Jesus was falsely accused but He held his peace, and I accept the accusation without trying to justify myself, that is brokenness. When another is preferred before me and I am deliberately passed over, and I remember that they cried "away with this man and release unto us Barabbas" and I bow my head and accept rejection that is brokenness. When my plans are brushed aside and I see the work of years brought to ruins by the ambitions of others and I remember that Jesus allowed them to lead Him away to crucify Him, and He accepted that place of failure, and I bow my head and accept the injustice without bitterness, that is brokenness. When in order to be right with my God it is necessary to take the humbling path of confession and restitution, and I remember that Jesus made Himself of no reputation and humbled Himself to death, even the death of the cross, and I bow my head and I'm ready to take the shame of exposure, that is brokenness. When others take unfair advantage of me because I'm a Christian and treat my belongings as public property and I remember that they stripped Him, and parted His garments casting lots, and I bow my head and accept joyfully the spoiling of my goods for His sake, this is brokenness. When one acts toward me in an unforgivable way and I remember when He was crucified, He prayed "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" and I bow my head and accept any behavior towards me as permitted by my heavenly father, this is brokenness. When people expect the impossible of me, and more than time and human strength can give, and I remember that Jesus said "this is my body which is broken for you" and I repent of my self indulgence and lack of self-giving for others, this is brokenness."

Prayer: Father, we remember the great man of God that Peter became through his trials and how You were able to use him greatly, despite his shortcomings. Would you continue to work in each of us and mold us like clay, so that we may be more like You and accomplish the things You have prepared for us?

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