

## 9. The Three-Time Denial of Peter

### Jesus' Final Days on Earth

In the three-time denial of Peter, we have a story not unlike what many go through in their walk of following Christ. The story of Peter's denial under pressure and fear should comfort and encourage us. Many believers have had the enemy lie to them that they have committed an “unforgivable sin.” Hence, the Holy Spirit directed the Gospel writers to focus time in their writings on this experience of Peter, aside from the central drama of the crucifixion. We are to see that God is full of grace, mercy, and forgiveness toward those who have, by their actions, denied Christ.

It was more than likely past midnight when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. John tells us that they bound Christ before leading Him across the Kidron Brook to the high priest's palace on the Temple area's west side. Annas had been the high priest for ten years, and the position was supposed to be a life-long vocation, but the Roman procurator Gratus deposed him. The son-in-law of Annas, Caiaphas, held the title of High priest, but he was more a puppet of Annas (Acts 4:6). Annas was still seen as the most influential in much of the political and social life of the nation of Israel. Annas and Caiaphas lived in the palace compound of the High priest's residence, with a courtyard separating them. Living lavishly through their various money-making schemes, they were well protected with walls, gates, servants, and guards to protect them. We will look at what all four Gospel writers record to arrive at a complete picture of all the drama.

<sup>54</sup>Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. <sup>55</sup>But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them (Luke 22:54-55).

Luke, Matthew, and Mark note that Peter followed the “large crowd” (Matthew 26:47) at a distance. As we stated in our previous study on Christ’s arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, there were more than 450 Roman soldiers plus the temple guards, which, estimated, brought the number to around 600 people. After Jesus was arrested, the eleven disciples scattered, but two found one another on the way and followed the large crowd. Luke does not say who the other disciple was, but it was likely the apostle John. In typical fashion for John, he rarely spoke about himself. Here’s what John wrote:

<sup>15</sup>Simon 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, <sup>16</sup>but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there, and brought Peter in. <sup>17</sup>"You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." <sup>18</sup>It 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).

Question 1) As Peter followed at a distance, getting closer and closer to the high priest’s palace, what kind of thoughts do you imagine occupied his mind?

Peter's thoughts were likely on his words to Jesus that he would not fall away and was ready to go to prison and death (Luke 22:33). He was too confident in his abilities and character. Perhaps he was determined to prove Christ wrong when Jesus said earlier that Peter would deny Him before the night was out. Notice that the Lord called Peter by his name before he met Christ as if to remind him that he often reverted to character traits he had before he began walking as a disciple:

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

Simon Peter was still not yet ready for the responsibility that God would put upon his shoulders. He was too overconfident in himself. So, the question before us today is how does God change our lives when we fall short of what He is making us be? Our passage about Peter will help us to see how God works.

### The Holy Spirit's Transformative Work

When we are confident that we have it all together, we are vulnerable to attack by our enemy, Satan. Paul the apostle wrote about this when he said, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12). Peter would be a leader and a model to those around him, so God had to deal with his overconfidence by putting him through a trial, i.e., a test that would strengthen him when he was restored to dependence on Christ.

When writing this study, I have walked with Christ for more than forty-five years and have found that God is constantly at work in our lives (Philippians 2:13) to transform us and make us more like Himself. Paul writes about this process as starting slowly and increasing with time as we are obedient to the Spirit of God. As this happens, we reflect His glory, and our transformed lives affect those around us.

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 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."<sup>1</sup> In this situation before us today, Peter was still experiencing ongoing training just before the crucifixion. Henry Ward Beecher put it this way: "Happiness is not the end of life; character is." Once we become disciples of the Lord Jesus, 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. God is determined that Peter will be fruitful, not in his abilities but entirely reliant on His Lord. It is the same with all of us who follow Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Key Word Study Bible, AMG Publishers, 3565 *Metamorphoō*, page 1651.

## Peter Disowns Jesus

As he followed at a distance, Peter was likely scared. He had no way of knowing if these were his last hours. He witnessed the power of Jesus when all the Roman soldiers in Gethsemane fell to the ground at just a few simple words of Christ. The question surely came to His mind, why would the Lord display such power and yet let the soldiers arrest Him? Why didn't Christ run? Why did Jesus allow Himself to be captured? When the two followed Jesus to the palace of the high priest, Peter summoned up his courage, perhaps, to think that maybe he could be a witness for Christ at any trial that would take place.

At the high priest's palace, Jesus was taken first to the residence of Annas, who began to question Christ, hoping to get something from Him, i.e., to find some charge with which to accuse Christ at the trial before the Sanhedrin, the ruling seventy elders. The law said that there could not be less than twenty-three members of the Sanhedrin to try a capital case, and Annas knew that his son-in-law Caiaphas was rounding up that number to hold the court proceedings. It was also against the law to try a person while it was yet dark.

How did Peter and John get past the guard at the gate to the high priest's grounds? It has been suggested that John, being a fisherman from Galilee, had been the seller of fresh fish to the high priest's household, and that is how he had come to be known by the servants and family of the high priest. This is just speculation, but it is clear that Peter was afraid of being recognized and associated with Jesus.

When Peter and John arrived at the palace, John knocked on the courtyard's outer gate. Because he knew the servants, he gained entrance first and then returned with a servant girl to also let in Peter. It seems that the two parted after they gained access. We are not told why, but the reason, perhaps, is because Peter would have been afraid to be seen by Malchus, the high priest's servant whose ear Peter had cut off. Maybe John went into the building to listen to the gathering of leaders over the different court proceedings over the next few hours. Because it was cold that evening, Peter warmed himself by the fire.

<sup>56</sup>A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." <sup>57</sup>But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said. <sup>58</sup>A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." "Man, I am not!" Peter replied (Luke 22:56-58).

What 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 feared the young girl would call the soldiers? We cannot tell what fears were in his mind at that moment. Let's credit Peter for even going into the high priest's courtyard and staying longer. Luke tells us that he 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. Matthew tells us that the fireside denial was before some people:

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

Luke writes that the servant girl looked closely at Peter seated with others in front of the fire before accusing him, saying, "this man was also with him" (Luke 22:56). His denial to those around the fire constituted his second denial. This sudden accusation is the way temptation will often come to us. We give the enemy an inch, and he takes a foot. We give him a foot, and he takes a yard. We 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. Likely, Peter was now afraid he was discovered and needed to get away from the fire in the courtyard. Matthew tells us that he moved to the gateway, trying to find an exit:

<sup>71</sup>Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." <sup>72</sup>He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" (Matthew 26:71-72).

Nothing tells us that the household servants would have done anything to Peter. He was reduced to denying the Lord out of his fear. Luke wrote that an hour went by between the second denial and the third and last (22:59). About the time of the third denial, John gives us a bit more information, perhaps, because he was also in the courtyard and recognized the one challenging Jesus as a relative of Malchus. Those around the fire now had a witness that made Peter completely lose his composure. John wrote:

One 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 picture we see is of several people suspiciously looking at Peter. 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:

<sup>73</sup>After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." <sup>74</sup>Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. <sup>75</sup>Then 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).

Luke gives us more insight into what finally broke Peter's heart and caused him to weep bitterly:

<sup>59</sup>About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." <sup>60</sup>Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. <sup>61</sup>**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." <sup>62</sup>And he went outside and **wept bitterly** (Luke 22:59-62).

How painful it was for Peter to hear the cock crow a second time and be immediately reminded of Jesus' words that, before the cock crows, Peter would deny his Lord three times. In God's sovereignty, the very same instant when Jesus was brought out of the house of Annas to be taken across the courtyard to Caiaphas was the same time that Peter and Jesus heard the cock crowing. As soon as the words of his third denial left Peter's lips, the Lord looked at Peter, and their eyes connected. There was no accusation in Jesus' eyes, only sadness for Peter. The Greek word translated as "looked" (v. 61) is *emlepo*. This word describes a fixed look, almost a stare. This look from Jesus broke Peter's heart; he remembered all his protestations that he could stand in the hour of trial, but instead, he failed miserably. He went outside the courtyard and wept bitterly. The verb "wept" describes a weeping, mournful cry like those grieving the death of a loved one. He was brokenhearted at his failure.

Question 2) D.L. Moody once said, "Character is what a man is in the dark." What things does God use in our lives to test and reveal and refine our character?

### **God's Aim—A Broken and Contrite Heart**

This testimony by Luke is not so much focused on Peter's failure as it is about his brokenness and repentance. How quickly he repented. We may never have denied Jesus with our lips as Peter did, but I am sure that, at one time or another, we have rejected Him with our actions. This passage is recorded for us to see God's mercy and complete forgiveness. God often allows us to experience pain, for pain is an excellent teacher. Usually, when our suffering makes us hit rock bottom, and we are broken of our pride and self-adequacy, we come to a place where we look to the Savior.

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

Peter was broken in his stubborn and prideful will. The place of our brokenness is the place where God can step in and save and heal us. God's school of training is more than Bible college and more than head knowledge. His training often includes brokenness and contriteness of heart. Over the last forty-five years that I have followed Jesus, I have learned that God uses our life experiences as a school to teach and prepare us for eternity. He molds and shapes our character through everyday situations. Some situations can be very trying, e.g., the death of a family member, a financial need, or an impatient child. The list is endless.

**The LORD will judge [for and on behalf of] his people and have compassion on his servants when he sees their strength is gone and no one is left, slave or free (Deuteronomy 32:36).**

While we have adequate resources to fight our own battles, the Lord lets us carry on until we come to the place of brokenness and an end to self. The Holy Spirit will bring us to a place where we find ourselves devoid of help, having no strength left to accomplish what needs to be done, having no backup plan, and no one but God to call to for help. That is when God steps in to fight our battles for us. When we are weak, then we are strong in Him (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

For each of us, when the right time comes, and the work of God in breaking us is complete, then God has compassion on us, i.e., when he sees that our strength is gone and we have no backup plan in reserve, we find complete deliverance and dependence on God.

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 no beauty or correct shape to be useful. 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 Peter (and us, too) is that through brokenness, God will reshape every one of us. All He needs is a broken and contrite heart.

### **Brokenness? What is it?**

Brokenness is the working of God in a person's life leading to the point of abandonment of oneself 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, I remember that they cried, "Away with this man and release unto us Barabbas." 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, I remember that Jesus allowed them to lead Him away to crucify Him. He accepted that place of failure, and I bow my head and accept the injustice without bitterness; that is brokenness. When to be right with my God, it is necessary to take the humbling path of confession and restitution. 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 the spoiling of my goods joyfully 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." 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, I remember that Jesus said, "this is my body which is given for you," and I repent of my self-indulgence and lack of self-giving for others; this is brokenness.

**Question 3) 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?**

## The Restoration of Peter

After the resurrection, the Lord told the disciples that He would see them in Galilee (Matthew 28:10). So sometime over the next few days, they began the eighty-mile walk north to the Galilee area of Israel. Imagine Peter's feelings as he anticipated this meeting with Christ. The brokenhearted disciple must surely have been struggling with his denial of Christ. He may not have even felt worthy of being in the company of the other disciples. The Lord knew Peter's downcast heart and ensured Peter got the invitation. When the angels at the empty tomb appeared to the women after the resurrection, they singled out Peter, saying,

But go, tell his disciples *and Peter*, He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you (Mark 16:7; emphasis mine).

We all fear confrontation. There has to be something wrong with a person if they enjoy being confronted with a sin or mistake. However, confrontation can be one of the most loving things a person can do or have done to them. The Lord told Mary Magdalene to tell Peter that He would see him in Galilee, which I am sure made him a bit nervous about the confrontation he expected. We have all had times when we have had to face our failures. The enemy of our souls would have us believe that we are out for the count and not worthy, thereby halting our growth and effectiveness.

Satan knows what will happen when we get up, having learned more of God's grace and more of our need to trust and lean on Christ. Our thankfulness deepens, and our failures make us stronger. We have more humility in our souls and more dependence on the Lord. How we respond to our failure will determine where we go from that point. We are *to fail* forward and continue to walk this life of faith in God. In Galilee, while they waited for Jesus, Peter had the urge to go back to what he did in his younger days:

“I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing (John 21:3).

John tells us that it was early in the morning when Jesus called them from the shore, asking them in the negative, almost as if He knew that they had no fish: “He called out to them, ‘Friends, haven’t you any fish?’ ‘No,’ they answered” (John 21:5). Some people say that you can never trust a fisherman to tell the truth. I hope that this ex-commercial fisherman has broken that mold! If a fisherman is catching fish, he will never tell you because he doesn't want you to see where he is fishing, fearing that you will be at that spot the next day! If they aren't catching any fish, they won't tell you that, either, because it is a shame for a fisherman not to catch fish. Fishermen frequently will stretch the truth about the one that got away, but the disciples were honest with Jesus that morning and said they had no fish. Life can be unfruitful unless the Lord is in the boat or directing where to cast our net.

Even though they did not yet recognize that it was the Lord, they did so when the Lord said to try the right side of the boat. Immediately, they caught so many fish that they had difficulty hauling in the net. Instantly, their minds returned to a time some three years earlier when Jesus had instructed them to push out their boat into the deep water and recast their nets for a catch (Luke

5:4-11). Again, He was demonstrating His authority over nature and giving them a supernatural catch. When they saw this miracle repeated before their eyes, they knew it was the Lord on the shoreline. John first realized who was on the shore and directing them, saying, “It is the Lord” (John 21:7).

At the words of John, Peter wrapped himself with his outer garment and swam to Jesus. Peter had denied Jesus publicly, and now he is restored before the others.

<sup>15</sup>When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” <sup>16</sup>Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” <sup>17</sup>The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep (John 21:15-17).

Jesus lovingly asked Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” (v. 15).

Most Bible scholars give two distinct possibilities regarding what the word "these" refers to. The Lord could have been referring to the other disciples with whom he enjoyed such close fellowship, but He could also have been referring to the nets, boats, and fish where Peter had spent most of his life making his living. Perhaps Peter wondered if he was finished as a minister of Christ, thinking he was disqualified to serve God because of his three-time denial. With the Lord, though, brokenness is part of the training. Jesus had no sharp criticism for him but asked Peter the only question that matters, "Do you love me?"

There are many things that Peter may have been expecting Jesus to say to him, but I don't think he was planning to be asked about his love for Christ. When Jesus asked Peter the first time, He asked him if he loved Christ with *agape* love. Peter responded by saying he loved Christ with an affectionate love, avoiding using the self-sacrificial Greek word *agape*. He was no longer self-confident and admitted that his love was insufficient to be described as *agape* love alongside the tender *agape* love of the Lord. For each of the three denials, the Lord asked him three times about his love for Him. Do you love Me? This is the heart of all ministry that God's people do in His Name—is it done out of a personal and abiding love for Christ?

Peter's restoration was complete, with the other disciples witnessing it. This reinstatement was necessary because Peter was called to feed and care for the flock of God, and he needed the other disciples' respect, fellowship, and support. The Lord set the stage with a charcoal fire similar to the one around which Peter denied his Lord. There were three confessions of love to answer the three denials of Peter and then three commissions from the Lord.

We need to grasp that Christ's love for Peter was just as strong and the same as before his denial. We are not loved any less for our failures. The important thing is that we make love our focus and return to the Lord every time. Rebound back into the grace of the Lord Jesus and the calling of God for your life. Peter responded to God's calling for his life and eventually was martyred for his faith.



Prayer: Father, we remember the great man of God that Peter became through his trials and how You used him much, 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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