

MBC - 10/14/2018 - Pastor Doug Thompson
"Peter's Denial"
Matthew 26:69-75

We are just moments away from the cross in our study of Matthew's Gospel, but Matthew leaves the trial of Jesus to give us this vignette of Peter—

- Matthew 26:69-75 ⁶⁹Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." ⁷¹And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷²And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." ⁷³After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." ⁷⁴Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. ⁷⁵And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

* * *

- In May of last year, 29 Islamic terrorists pulled over a bus with 29 Egyptian Christians on board and demanded that each one deny their faith in Jesus Christ. Every single one of them, including children—refused. Each was killed in cold blood with a gunshot to the head or the throat.

God can give that kind of courage to His children in those moments.

But in the third century, a violent persecution of Christians came under the Emperor Decius. He arrested anyone suspected of being a Christian and they were ordered to deny their faith and make a sacrifice to the gods. And many did, while others were tortured or killed for refusing the Emperor's orders.

After this persecution there was a time of peace and some of those who had denied their faith were sorry and wanted back into the church. They were called the *lapsi* - the lapsed ones. And this became a huge issue in the church: should these people who took the easy way out be forgiven and restored? Some church leaders said yes, others said no. Didn't Jesus say—

- ³²"Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. ³³"But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. Matthew 10:32-33 (NASB95)

And isn't this just what Peter did?

This morning I want us to see two men: one is Peter who loved Jesus so much, but even his love for Jesus couldn't keep him from caving in to his weakness and his fear. But the other Man I want us to see is Jesus, who loved Peter even more. While Peter was outside denying His Friend, and saying whatever it would take to save his own life, Jesus was inside saying what He knew would *cost* Him His life. Because He knew that by laying down His life, He would gain *forgiveness for any sin* for all those who trust in Him. And Jesus *forgave* Peter - *yes, even for the sin of denying him before men*. In this story, Jesus' forgiveness is bigger than Peter's failure.

- Let me ask you this morning: Don't you want someone who will love you like that? Through your worst failures - when you have cried your eyes out after some disgusting sin - someone who is still there for you, even when you have offended them, with their

arms open. That's Jesus. And only Jesus: "When I fear my faith will fail, He will hold me fast. When the tempter would prevail, Christ will hold me fast."

So let's remember what has already happened on this night—

I. Satan's sifting - our Savior's security.

It began in the Upper Room where Jesus wanted to spend His last precious moments with His Disciples. He washed their feet, He gave them the bread and the cup of the Lord's Table so that they would always remember this night and what He was about to do for them. Over in John's Gospel, He told them that He was going to prepare a place for them, and that He would come back for them. He told them that very shortly He would send the Holy Spirit to be Another Comforter who would actually dwell in them to lead, and guide, bring His Word back to their minds and hearts.

He told them, they would be treated the same way He was treated, but He would give them the words to speak when they were brought before kings. Through persecution, they would have *His peace*, not as the world gives.

Jesus also told them that one of them would betray Him, and it came to pass, just as He said. And on this same night, He also said that they would all abandon Him. Let's read it again—

- Matthew 26:31-35 ³¹Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' ³²But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." ³³Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." ³⁴Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." ³⁵Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

And every detail happened exactly as Jesus predicted it would. This is *fulfilled prophecy*, pre-recorded history. So why did Jesus tell Peter ahead of time what he was going to do? Jesus had two purposes for Peter and He intends the same purposes for us this morning as we read this—

1.) Jesus wants us to worship Him as sovereign, omnipotent God. I'll say it again: only God can predict the future because only God is sovereign, and omnipotent to control every detail so that what He says comes to pass. We should get a little shiver when we consider that our Jesus controls the movement of every atom, every galaxy, and every human heart! And we should be in awe and worship Him for that. The second purpose is this—

2.) Jesus wants us to grow stronger in our faith. He didn't make this prediction so that after it happened He could say to Peter, "See, I told you so!" It was so Peter would trust Him more. Jesus can be trusted in everything He says because everything He says, happens!

Luke records something amazing that Jesus said to Peter on this very same night. Look with me—

- Luke 22:31-34 ³¹"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³²but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And *when* (not *if*) you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." [This went right over Peter's head!] ³³Peter said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to

death.”³⁴ Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”

*Oh, Jesus wanted Peter to know that there was a spiritual warfare going on for his soul - Satan wanted to shake Peter's faith violently. And Jesus gave Satan permission, but - *but* - it was Jesus' purpose that would be fulfilled through this violent shaking, not Satan's. Satan wanted to destroy Peter's faith, Jesus wanted to sift and refine it. And Jesus would hold him fast! And then *restore* Peter after his fall, and even use him in greater ways than he ever could have imagined.

*Here's what you and I need to take away from this: Sometimes we put trials into two categories: there's the kind that are outside of me, out of my control, like natural disasters, terrible diseases, etc. - of course God is sovereign over that kind of stuff. But then there are disasters that are due to my own sin. And beloved, God is sovereign over that too.

- When Rom.8.28 says that God causes *all* things to work together for good for His children, *all* means *all!* He is not excluding your sins! They don't hinder His good, eternal, sovereign purposes for you, they are part of it - and I say in the same breath that it doesn't mitigate your own responsibility for your sins. And we'll all get to listen to Jesus explain all of this when we get home!

The point is, Peter's failure and was just as much a part of God's eternal script as Jesus' obedience. Let's see how this unfolds—

II. A servant girl's question.

- Matthew 26:69-70⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.”⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.”

Peter isn't facing a high-powered governmental official, slamming him up against a wall, demanding information. No one is even threatening him here. This is just a young servant girl. John tells us that she was the servant who kept watch at the door into Caiaphas' court yard - minimum security! And actually, what John says is very interesting. Listen to this—

- John 18:15-16¹⁵ Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple (that is John). Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest,¹⁶ but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in.

Now do you get this? John had some sort of relationship to Caiaphas, and went right in to the court yard, then he had Peter let in - which means that this servant girl knew who John was, and that he was one of Jesus' disciples, but John isn't denying Jesus. Interesting.

So it's this servant girl, after she lets Peter in - “*came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” “Also - i.e., along with John,”* (who doesn't seem to be afraid.)

- And it doesn't say that she was shouting, or making a big scene. Just asking - little girl, big fisherman. How does he respond? “*But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.”*”

Peter used a form of wording used to testify in a courtroom: He was making a categorical denial. He was bearing false witness. *He was lying, and it was for the purpose of disassociating himself from Jesus!*

Think about that: The very thing he promised Jesus he would *never* do. Jesus was inside being slapped, beaten, covered with spit, having His beard pulled out, and being condemned to death by the Jewish authorities, and all because He said nothing but the truth. Outside, Peter caves in to a servant girl, breaks his promise, and lies.

Let's take a minute and ask the question: "How did this happen to Peter?"

III. A fisherman's failure.

Three observations—

1.) *Peter wasn't ready for spiritual warfare.*

Peter had just taken a swing with his sword at the head of the servant of the high priest. But *this*, he didn't plan for. This caught him completely off guard. Maybe as he was warming himself around the fire, he was thinking to himself: "I told Jesus I would never desert Him. I gotta be ready. Maybe he pictured himself standing before Pilate, boldly confessing Jesus like Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, "I will not recant! Here I stand, I can do no other!" And they would make movies about him . . . Maybe he was ready for something big, like that.

But he wasn't ready for a little servant girl's question: "Aren't you also one of 12 guys who were with Jesus?" "No."

* Peter didn't have his spiritual armor on, did he? Remember our study in Ephesians 6, not that long ago? He hadn't fastened on the belt of truth and integrity. He didn't have on the breastplate of righteousness - he wasn't guarding his heart. And he certainly didn't have up his shield of faith because a little fiery dart found its mark. He wasn't ready for battle.

- Your enemy knows exactly where you are vulnerable and that's where he attacks. He goes for the section of the wall that is unprotected. You can be all ready for temptation in one area, and completely wipe out in another. Where are you vulnerable this morning?

2.) *He boasted too much.*

Peter's great flaw here was over-confidence. He was Peter, the Rock - Jesus said so! He was the leader of the Twelve, he was the man. "Even if all these *other* guys bail on You, Lord, not Peter, the Rock!" He actually told Jesus He was wrong! And he put himself above his brothers.

When you boast like that, you're forced to live up to your boast - so your attention is on yourself and *your* resources - not Christ and *His* resources. Peter had '*the armor of Peter*' on that night - not '*the armor of God!*' He had faith in his own faith. And that is so deadly. When you are over-confident in yourself, you stop trusting in Christ, and you stop listening to Christ - didn't Peter do that?

- When you wonder how world famous pastors can fall and lose everything - this is how: They said to themselves "Oh no, not me. It will *never* happen to me. I don't need to take the precautions that others need to take. I don't need accountability like other men. *I'm an exception.*"

You've heard me say it: "You can't be an example to others if you see yourself as an exception to others." And none of us are exceptions to these Scriptures that we should all memorize—

- Proverbs 16:18 ¹⁸*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*
- 1 Corinthians 10:12 ¹²Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands *take heed* lest he fall.

3.) *He prayed too little.*

--Because he was overconfident. We have to connect this to what happened just a few minutes earlier in the Garden of Gethsemane: Jesus was agonizing in prayer to stay on course and go to the cross. Jesus! A sinless, perfect Man, and yet He desperately needed His Father's strength and presence to obey, so He pleaded and prayed until He sweat blood. In His humanity, facing this horrible ordeal, Jesus was humble, submissive, and dependent, so He *prayed*.

- While Peter, James, and John, slept. That's nothing but pride. When you aren't praying, it's because you are prideful - you don't think you really need God's help to get through whatever is in front of you. You will bother Him for big stuff, but not small potatoes. Truth is, we should be terrified not to pray! We should be desperate to plead with God for His strength, and wisdom, and alertness as we go into our daily battles.

IV. The second denial.

But let's go back to that courtyard where Peter has just lied about being one of Jesus' Disciples. Out of fear for his own skin. And notice what it says in—

- Matthew 26:71 ⁷¹And when he went out to the entrance. . .

He's heading out. He feels guilty, afraid, and he is moving away from the fire, into the shadows, and even further from Jesus—

- V.71: . . . another servant girl saw him (maybe the first girl's shift was over, and this one took over guarding the gate), and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth."

So people are milling around in the courtyard - lookie-loo's - curious about what is happening to Jesus and His followers, talking about it. They all heard what the first girl said about this man, and his denial. Now the second girl confirms it to the others: "Yes - he was with Jesus of Nazareth!"

- Matthew 26:72 ⁷²And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man."

Peter actually called God to curse him if he was lying - "I do not know the Man." He had heard Jesus teach that we shouldn't use oaths at all, just let your yes be yes, and your no be no. But he was in this thing too deep now. Does that ever happen to you? One lie leads to another, to another.

And I need to tell you: these three denials didn't happen one right after another, like Peter didn't have time to think in between - they happened over about 2 hours. He had time to think about what he had done, to repent and recover, but he didn't! He just dug himself deeper.

And it happened a third time—

V. The third denial.

- Matthew 26:73 ⁷³After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.”

In Mark’s Gospel, they recognize that Peter was a *Galilean*. To Judeans, those hicks up north talked with an accent. Peter couldn’t hide it. You don’t have to talk to Bob Ellenberg for more than a couple minutes to know that he’s not a Yankee! But John’s Gospel tells something interesting about the person who confronted Peter here—

- John 18:26 ²⁶One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?”

i.e., “You were with Jesus when we arrested him, and you cut my cousin’s ear off!”

Now Peter realizes that he could be in some real trouble. Look at his reaction—

- Matthew 26:74 ⁷⁴Then he began to invoke a curse ~~on himself~~ and to swear, “I do not know the man.”

He wasn’t using profanity, he was calling down a curse, but “*on himself*” is not in the Gk. text here. I want you to listen to what I’m about to say here: The way this is worded, Peter wasn’t cursing himself, but *another*. Just a few years later, under the Emperor Trajan, professing Christians were forced to worship the emperor, and to curse Jesus, or be executed. From the way Matthew words this in the Gk., the most natural explanation is that Peter was calling a curse (literally, anathema) on *Jesus* - “*lesous anathema!*” and swearing that he didn’t even know Him. And he was doing this over and over. (see France, p.1034)

I think of what Paul said in—

- 1 Corinthians 12:3 ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” “*lesous anathema!*”

Did Peter really say this? Did the Holy Spirit depart from Peter, and did he sink so low that he would have cursed His beloved friend and Lord? Save that question. Let’s see how this ends—

- And immediately the rooster crowed. ⁷⁵And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

VI. Jesus’ look, Jesus’ forgiveness.

Luke records something else that preceded Peter’s tears—

- Luke 22:61-62 ⁶¹And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.”

Jesus was being taken out of Caiaphas’ house at that very moment, and He caught Peter’s eye and looked at him. What was in Jesus’ eyes as he looked at Peter? It wasn’t surprise. It

wasn't, "I told you so!" And it wasn't anger. It was sorrow, pity, love, and *forgiveness*. *Jesus forgave Peter*.

- And Peter's heart was broken: ⁶²And he went out and wept bitterly.

And that's the end of this chapter, but not the end of the story for Peter.

Peter's faith didn't fail. You say, "Are you kidding me? This was a massive fail. How can you say his faith didn't fail?" Because Jesus *said* He prayed that Peter's faith would not fail, that's how I can say it! Peter's confession failed. His courage failed. His faith wobbled, but he never completely lost it, because Jesus held him fast.

- I think it was that look he gave Peter. The tears that Peter wept were tears of heart-broken grief, but they were also tears of gratitude for Jesus' compassion and forgiveness. We're going to see in the next paragraph that Judas had remorse over his sin, but *Peter had a Christ-given repentance*. And we see it in those tears. This was a man who was poor in spirit, mourning over his sins—This is a Christian's proper response to sin.

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise!" And that kind of brokenness *only comes as a gift of God to His children*. And Peter was *still* God's child.

- And Prov.24.16 says, "For though a righteous man falls 7 times, he rises again." That was Peter. He was knocked down, but he wasn't knocked out!

We see him racing to the empty tomb to see if what those women said was true. We see him in that locked room, waiting on Jesus with the rest of the Disciples after His resurrection. Then we see him jump into the sea Galilee and swim 100 yards when he sees the risen Jesus on the shore!

And then Jesus takes Peter aside on that beach. He had to be wondering what Jesus would say to him. But Jesus asks him 3 times, "Peter, do you love Me?" "Lord, you know I love You." He gave Peter the opportunity to make up for the 3 times he had denied Him. How gracious is Jesus! And then He commissioned Peter to feed His sheep, which he did, until the end of his life when he was crucified upside down. He led 1000's of people to Christ, and wrote two precious epistles.

And it wasn't Peter's greatness that did this; Jesus held him fast. Jesus prayed that his faith would not fail. And it did not. And if you are God's child, Jesus is praying for *you*, so your faith *will not* fail. ***"He ever lives above, for me to intercede; His all redeeming love, His precious blood, to plead."***

You might get knocked down, many times, before you make it home, but you will make it home.

* * *

What do we take home from this story?

1.) Never underestimate the power of remaining sin in you.

Isn't that just what Peter did? Never forget that the new creature you are in Christ is incarcerated in fallen flesh that is not yet redeemed. There is still something corrupt and rotten in you, and you dare not ignore it. As godly a man as Paul said—

- Romans 7:15 ¹⁵For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.
- Romans 7:18 ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.
- Romans 7:21-23 ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

So never trust your own flesh. Have a healthy distrust of who you are and what you are capable of! Never think you've got it licked. I cringe when I hear Christians say that: "Oh I don't struggle with that sin." I'm telling you, don't say that. Because that is *exactly* where you will be vulnerable to the enemy because it's where you won't be *watching*, and where you won't be *praying*.

2.) *Never underestimate God's forgiveness.*

It is literally *greater* than any sin that you could commit. Maybe you see yourself in Peter this morning. And you can think of times when you've denied Jesus by your silence or betrayed Him by your actions. Maybe you worry that God isn't willing to forgive you. But I tell you by the authority of His Word, if you are trusting in Christ, He already has! Not one sin remains on your account! If God forgave David of his great sins, and Peter of his, He will forgive you and me. For *any* sin, and I mean *any*.

And God has already forgiven them in Christ. Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds!

Can God forgive cursing Jesus? Jesus said He can! And maybe He said this for Peter—

- Matthew 12:31-32 ³¹Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be *forgiven* people . . . ³²And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be *forgiven* . . .

3.) *Be ready.*

Watch and pray. Have your armor on. Every day. Every day pray, "*Keep me from temptation and deliver me from evil.*" You can't store up readiness - it has no shelf life! It has to be fresh.

- Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch girl who was taken to a concentration camp by the Germans in WWII. Before they took her away, she asked her father how could know that she would have the strength to keep trusting Christ? Her father said to her: "Corrie, when I send you on the train to go somewhere, do I give you the ticket a month ahead of time, or do I give you the ticket as you get on the train?" The point is that God doesn't give us faith ahead of time to imagine how we will respond to hard situations, He gives us the faith when we meet those hard situations.

Peter wasn't ready. And you're not ready when you say, "No problem, I'm ready!" You're ready when you say, in prayer: "Oh Lord, I can't do this without You. My spirit is willing, but

my flesh is weak, and I need Your strength for my weakness. Keep me far from temptation and deliver me from evil!”

When you feel ready, strong, pumped up - you're not ready. Didn't Paul say, “*For when I am - what - weak - then I am strong!*” So stay weak, distrustful of your flesh, desperately clinging to Christ, praying without ceasing to stay close to Him.

And don't talk to servant girls.

- Amazing Grace/My Chains are Gone - Bring on new members.