

The Denial of Peter (Matt. 26:69–75)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Speaking personally, the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus is one of the most difficult things for me to read in the whole Bible. His sin is so great, and yet the narrative sounds like something that I could easily do in the same circumstances. I can think of countless times where my weakness has tripped me up in the same way, even while the circumstances may have been different. Especially, we must not read this as though this were a mere tragedy by ignoring the promise of Christ’s grace to reinstate Peter later on (Matt. 26:32). As we read this, we must not study Peter’s fall at arm’s length, as though this were Peter’s peculiar sin. In this story, we find a powerful reminder that *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*.

Compromised (Matt. 26:69–70)

Before we come to the narrative in this section, we must remember that Jesus had warned Peter several times about the danger that awaited him that night, first by telling all the disciples that they would fall away (Matt. 26:31) and by telling Peter specifically that he would deny him three times (Matt. 26:34). Then, when Jesus invited Peter to come with him to the garden of Gethsemane to pray, Jesus urged Peter to devote the time to prayer: “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41). Even so, after Peter does abandon and flee from Jesus (Matt. 26:56), he also cannot help himself from sneaking in the courtyard of the high priest in order to observe the trial proceedings against Jesus (Matt. 26:58). While Peter’s courage is admirable in some sense, it is clear from Jesus’ warnings up to this point, and from what happens subsequently, that Peter’s actions were foolish: “having been warned that he would revolt, he ought rather to have concealed himself in some corner, so as not to expose himself to an occasion of sinning. Thus it frequently happens that believers, under an appearance of virtue, throw themselves within the reach of temptation.”¹

The personal details in the story, scattered through the four Gospel accounts, suggest that Peter himself was the source of the material, which further suggests that Peter himself wanted the church to learn from his own failure.² As Calvin writes, this story functions as “a bright mirror of our

¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:260.

² “It is remarkable and significant that the story of the denials should have been recorded at all. When the Gospel were written, Peter was regarded as the leading apostle, the chief man in the church. It would have been very natural to pass over in silence this man’s fall from grace. But all four of our Gospels recount it. They do not do this by way of demoting Peter, for in due course he repented, was reinstated, and continued in a position of leadership. But the church knew that its leaders was a fallible sinner like all others and that he had had a dreadful fall. The church knew, too, that he had repented and by the grace of God had gone on to

weakness” so that, in his repentance, we also have “a striking instance of the goodness and mercy of God is held out to us.” Thus, Calvin insists that this story is “highly useful, both to instruct those who are standing to cherish anxiety and fear, and to comfort those who have fallen, by holding out to them the hope of pardon.”³

When the temptation comes, it apparently catches Peter off-guard: “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’” (v. 69). At this point, it is only “one” (the language is not “a,” but “one”) servant girl.⁴ Moreover, there is no real accusation here but only an observation, and that coming from “not a man but a woman, not a mature woman but a girl, not a free woman but a slave” so that “this challenge was as gentle as could be imagined.”⁵ This aspect should give each of us pause as we reflect on our own weakness. Calvin writes, “Here we see that there is no necessity for a severe contest, or for many forces or implements of war, to overpower a man; for any man, who is not supported by the hand of God, will instantly fall by a slight gale or the rustling of a falling leaf.”⁶

While we are not given insight into the precise reasoning of Peter at this point, Lenski points out a number of factors that may have led Peter into his first denial of Jesus: “The suddenness of his exposure, its publicity before the crowd about the fire, the feeling that he was in danger at once upset Peter and filled him with panic. He saw no way out except to lie out.”⁷ His actions speak for themselves: “But he denied it before them all, saying, ‘I do not know what you mean’” (v. 70). The words Peter uses suggest that he is trying to evade the subject altogether, rather than to tell a direct lie. Calvin rightly notes, however, that “the form of denial, which is here set down, shows sufficiently that the wretched sophists, who endeavor to escape by ambiguous expressions, which they turn to a variety of meanings, when they are called to give an account of their faith, gain nothing by their dexterity in fraud.”⁸ Although the force with which Peter denies Jesus increases the next two times, the fact that Peter denied Jesus “before them all” is important: “This circumstance aggravates the criminality of Peter, that, in denying his Master, he did not even dread a multitude of witnesses.”⁹

Calloused (Matt. 26:71–72)

Caught in a lie, Peter attempts to escape the situation: “Verbal evasion is followed by physical

greater and better things. Moreover, there cannot have been others of Jesus’ followers in the group in the courtyard. It would seem that Peter himself is the origin of the story. He knew how badly he had fallen, and he confessed it before the church.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 687–88.)

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:260.

⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 624.

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 688.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:261.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1071.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:262.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:261. See also the *Westminster Larger Catechism* on the aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others: “From circumstances of time and place...if in public, or in the presence of others, who are thereby likely to be provoked or defiled” (WLC 151.4).

evasion: Peter is trying to avoid being noticed.”¹⁰ Yet, “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’” (v. 71). Poor Peter had only wanted to know what would become of his Master, but, in having come, he cannot avoid detection. Rather than fulfilling his own promise “never” to “fall away,” “even if [he] must die with” Jesus (Matt. 26:33, 35), Peter once again lies. This time, however, Peter moves past mere evasion to an outright lie—and one that he utters with an oath: “And again he denied it with an oath: ‘I do not know the man’” (v. 72).

While Peter will explicitly invoke a curse the next time, Carson offers an important point regarding the nature of the “oath” that Peter takes here: “‘Oath’ here (v.72) does not refer to ‘swearing’ as we know it in profanity; rather, Peter invokes a solemn curse on himself if he is lying and professes his ‘truthfulness’ by appealing to something sacred.”¹¹ Blomberg puts the matter bluntly: “Peter’s sin and guilt are increasing qualitatively and quantitatively.”¹² We see here an insight into the acceleration of sin, like a rock rolling down the hill, gaining speed as it goes, and destroying everything in its path on the way down. Calvin observes, “Hence we infer that a sinner, after having once fallen, is always hurried on from bad to worse; so that those who begin with ordinary offenses afterwards rush headlong into the basest crimes, from which at first they would have recoiled with horror.”¹³

Crushed (Matt. 26:73–75)

At this point, Peter may have felt some sting of denying Jesus, but he certainly hoped that the matter had been settled. It would have been possible to rationalize his denials in the heat of battle, especially if nothing more came of it. It is even possible that Peter had begun to make plans about how he would “do better next time” if any further challenges came again—so long as those challenges remained theoretical. Sadly, Peter still cannot shake the attention of the crowd, and another, more direct, challenge comes all too soon: “After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, ‘Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you’” (v. 73). Whatever resolutions Peter may have formed, he not only repeats his errors, but he intensifies his guilt: “Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, ‘I do not know the man’” (v. 74a).

Although the previous two denials were bad, this last one is worse than both. The oath that Peter took in the second denial may have implied a curse if he were lying, but this time Peter makes the implication explicit. To call down a curse as a testimony of truthfulness is a serious matter. Blomberg points out that the word to describe this curse “comes from the same root as ‘anathematize’—asking

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1033. France also cites W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr. (*Matthew 19–28*, ICC (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 3:542), who note that Peter’s words match his physical movement “further and further away from Jesus” as he goes to the gate.

¹¹ Carson, “Matthew,” 624. See also the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 22.1.

¹² Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 404.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:263.

God to punish him (or Christ) if he is lying.”¹⁴ As Calvin paraphrases, Peter is asking, “May I perish miserably, if I have any thing in common with the salvation of God!”¹⁵ Before this, his lies had only attempted to protect his safety, even while he distanced himself from Jesus. Now, however, Peter directly trades the safety he had with Christ for the immediate safety of the crowd surrounding him.

It is hard to imagine the grief-struck guilt Peter must have felt when, after this third denial, “immediately the rooster crowed” (v. 74b). Remembering how Jesus had predicted exactly what he would do, and remembering how much he had denied that such a thing could be possible, Peter moved still further away from Christ: “went out and wept bitterly” (v. 75).¹⁶ What hope could he have, now that he had so severely denied his master?

Of course, we do not do justice to this story without dealing with the rest of it. The Gospel of Matthew only implies what the other Gospels make explicit: Jesus ultimately forgives Peter and commissions him as an apostle to bring the gospel to all nations of the earth (Matt. 26:32; 28:16–20). We should recognize two important facets to this forgiveness. First, we should rightly understand Peter’s sin as a function of “weakness” rather than “incurable malice. For he would willingly have rendered to Christ the duties of friendship which he owed him, had not fear extinguished the sparks of proper affection.”¹⁷ The point of this observation is not to exploit a loophole to rationalize our sin, but only to offer comfort to those who feel crushed under the weight of their own failures to the Master they love. Second, and more importantly, Peter’s tears in secret exemplify “godly sorrow,” as opposed to the “worldly sorrow” of Judas, who will regret his betrayal of Jesus in the next chapter (Matt. 27:3–10; see 2 Cor. 7:10).¹⁸ That is, Peter’s tears demonstrated true contrition before the Lord rather than an external performance for public approval (Matt. 6:1–18).¹⁹ In Peter’s failure—and our Lord’s forgiveness—we have a story holding out the power of the gospel to weak sinners when we stumble in disobedience to our Master.

Discussion Questions

1. How many warnings had Peter received to prepare him for this trial (Matt. 26:31, 34, 41)? Through the scenes leading up to this moment, how often do we find Peter taking advantage of his opportunities to pray? How does Peter attempt to thread the needle of evading the servant girl’s question without entirely disowning Jesus (v. 70)? How does this exemplify a legalistic approach that attempts to look for a loophole rather than give wholehearted obedience?

¹⁴ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 405.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:264.

¹⁶ “...the final stage of withdrawal...” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1034.)

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:265.

¹⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1034.

¹⁹ “Yet Peter’s tears, which he shed in secret, testified before God and the angels that his repentance was true; for, having withdrawn from the eyes of men, he places before him God and the angels; and, therefore, those tears flow from the deep feelings of his heart. This deserves our attention; for we see many who shed tears purposely, so long as they are beheld by others, but who have no sooner retired than they have dry eyes. Now there is no room to doubt that tears, which do not flow on account of the judgment of God, are often drawn forth by ambition and hypocrisy.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:266.)

2. What does Peter's movement toward the entrance of the courtyard symbolize (v. 71)? When Peter is confronted again, by another servant girl, how does his second statement compare with his first? How had the compromise of the first encounter calloused his heart for this encounter? What does the "oath" element add to Peter's words here? How does Peter's moving from bad to worse warn you about the dangerous circumstances of your own life right now?
3. What do you think Peter may have been thinking in the "little while" between the second and third confrontation (v. 73)? How does Peter's third statement compare with the second (v. 74)? What does the "curse" that Peter invokes add to his statement? How did Peter go from insisting that he would die before denying Jesus to asking God to strike him dead if he is lying about his denial of Jesus (Matt. 26:35, 74)?
4. Where do you find yourself making little compromises in your sin, in an attempt to protect yourself in the midst of weakness? How does Peter's example warn you about the momentum that sin can gain to callous our hearts toward further sin? Have you been crushed by the weight of your sin (v. 75)? Has your grief been godly, driving you to repentance, or worldly, leading you only to feel bad about your sin, like Judas (2 Cor. 7:10; Matt. 27:3–5)?