

Peter: A Restored Leader

Simon Peter was the most prominent of the Twelve Apostles. The New Testament gives a more complete picture of Peter than of any other disciple of Jesus, except for the Apostle Paul. Peter is named first in all the listings of the Twelve.

Peter is sometimes considered to be a blundering fisherman, but actually Peter was a pioneer in the early church. His given name was Simon; his father's name was Jonah (John 1:42); his brother Andrew was also a disciple of Jesus (Mark 1:16). Peter was married, because the Gospels tell us that Jesus one time healed his mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14-15).

Peter and Andrew were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, perhaps in partnership with James and John (Luke 5:10). They were disciples of John the Baptist before Jesus called them as followers of Him. Peter was introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew, who had first sensed that Jesus was the Messiah (John 1:35-42).

Our study this time is about Peter's denials of Jesus, his heart-felt confession of sin, and his later restoration into fellowship with the Lord. There are three basic points in the lesson:

- 1) Jesus foretold Peter's denials (Luke 22:31-34).
- 2) Peter denied Jesus and then wept (Luke 22:54-62).
- 3) Peter was restored into fellowship with Christ (John 21:1-23).

1. Jesus Foretold Peter's Denials (Luke 22:31-34)

All four Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) tell about Peter's denials of the Lord Jesus, but only Luke describes *Satan's role in the temptation* which Peter faced.

Jesus said to Peter, "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat" (verse 31). These words show us that the devil indeed desires our ruin. Because he is invisible, it is easy to be unaware of his influence in our lives.

The "sifting of wheat" means "to shake" and "to toss to and fro." Sifting was for the purpose of removing chaff or foreign substances. Satan sifts us by means of temptation, hoping to remove us from the Lord's wheat.

We know from experience that overcoming temptation is often difficult. Temptation is usually attractive — and *giving in* to tempting opportunities, is sin. In fact, repeatedly giving in to sin's enticements can result in falling from God's way, and Hebrews 6:4-8 implies that sometimes it leads to a loss of interest even in returning to faith in the Lord Jesus.

The good news (in verse 32) is that Jesus assured Peter that although his faith would falter, it would not be completely destroyed, because our Lord promised to pray that his faith would not fail (verse 32a). And what Jesus did for Peter, He does daily for all who believe in His name.

Jesus also said (verse 32b), "And when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." The word "converted" does not so much speak of the new birth, as simply of "turning back." The disciples' names

were already written in Heaven (Luke 10:20). By using the words, “when thou art converted” — Jesus was saying, “When you have turned back again to Me, strengthen your brethren.” That is, Peter would be wiser after his experience, and he was to use that wisdom to help his brethren avoid succumbing to the same pitfalls.

Peter responded to the Lord’s warning about Satan’s temptation by saying, “Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death” (verse 33). In Mark’s account, Peter said in essence that even if the other disciples are offended because of Him, still he would be loyal to Jesus (Mark 14:29). These are words of a self-confident, inexperienced disciple, who had not yet found out the weakness of his own faith, and the deceitfulness of his own heart.

Jesus made a clear prediction in verse 34: “I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me.” That was a very remarkable prediction, a clear evidence of our Lord’s foreknowledge. Jesus knew that Peter would not only desert Him, but that he would also deny three times that he even knew Jesus!

Jesus said that before the night was over (within the space of a few hours), Peter would deny Him three times.

2. Peter Denied Jesus and Wept Bitterly (Luke 22:54-62)

The section of Luke 22, between verses 34 and 54, reports that Judas betrayed Jesus by leading the Roman soldiers to the Garden of Gethsemane, and then Jesus was led to the Jewish high priest’s house for a hearing. Most of the disciples had fled when Jesus was taken from the Garden of Gethsemane, but Peter “followed afar off.” He followed — but he stayed at a distance (verse 54).

Not too long after, Peter found himself in the courtyard of the high priest’s house, lingering with those who were warming themselves at a fire (verse 55). Huddled around a fire late at night, and surrounded by people who are indifferent to the Gospel — and at worst hostile to the Christian faith — is not an easy place to take a bold stand for the Lord. Before long, “a certain maid beheld him as he sat by the fire, and . . . said, This man was also with him” (verse 56). The next verse says that Peter denied Him, saying, “Woman, I know him not” (verse 57). Peter flatly denied that he knew Jesus.

Shortly afterward, someone else pointed the accusing finger at Peter, and once again said that Peter was one of the followers of Jesus. And again, Peter denied the charge (verse 58).

Not long after that, still another person recognized Peter as a Galilean, and said, “Of a truth this fellow also was with him, for he is a Galilean” (verse 59). Galileans spoke an Aramaic dialect with noticeable differences in pronunciation. Verse 60 records Peter’s answer this time: He said, “Man, I know not what thou sayest.” He said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Each time Peter was questioned, he made a strong denial of the Lord. First, he denied being with Jesus (verse 57). Second, he denied being one of Jesus’ followers (verse 58). And third, he fiercely denied even knowing Jesus (verse 60).

At the very moment, when Peter had denied Jesus the third time — while he was still speaking, the rooster started crowing (verse 60b).

At that moment, verse 61 says, “the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter; and Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.” Jesus, at the moment of Peter’s third denial, turned and looked at Peter — perhaps through an open doorway. It was *not* an “I-told-you-so” look, but a look of *such love and forgiveness* that it broke Peter’s heart.

Peter withered under the compassionate look of Jesus, and he remembered how Jesus had said that before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times — and Peter realized the seriousness of what he had done! He was overwhelmed with sorrow. That was 3-o’clock in the morning. The “cock-crow” was a Roman term for the end of the third watch.

The good part of this sad story is that it does not end with verse 61. Peter repented, was restored into God’s favor, and did not live the rest of his life with the burden of regret. He had staggered out into the night and there he “wept bitterly” (verse 62). His bitter weeping showed that he was heart-broken over the fact that he had denied Jesus. His conscience was tender enough to make him weep. We need more heart-broken repentance over sin in our day.

It is good to remember that Peter’s denials of the Lord came when he was alone — separated from the other disciples. He had been with John when he entered the courtyard on the night of the denials — but he had become separated from John, and stood alone in the midst of the Lord’s enemies.

The devil knows that we are usually weaker when we try to serve the Lord alone. This is likely one of the reasons why Jesus sent out His disciples two-by-two. The New Testament encourages believers to assemble together (Hebrews 10:25). Believers need the encouragement and support that comes from fellow Christians. No Christian should ever conclude that he can get along without the fellowship of the church — a larger body of believers.

God’s people assemble together to pray together, to strive together, to sing together, to work together, and to worship together. When we see the zeal of our fellow Christians, and share in their trials, and rejoice in their joys — it gives us new courage for serving the Lord while we are living in the midst of the spiritual darkness of a godless society (Philippians 2:15).

3. Peter Was Restored into Fellowship with Christ (John 21:1-23)

After the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, our Lord appeared to His disciples in Galilee (described in the 21st chapter of John). The disciples had gone north to their home area, and one evening Peter decided to go fishing. Some of the other disciples joined him.

They fished all night and caught nothing. When they came to shore, Jesus (unknown to them at the time), told them to drop their net on the other side of the boat — and they caught so many fish that the net almost broke. Within a short time they had a net full of *large fish* (John 21:11), and perhaps weighing as much as two hundred pounds.

Later, they recognized Jesus. He had built a fire, and was making breakfast — and He invited the disciples to have breakfast with Him.

The glistening of the Sea of Galilee was in the background; Peter was dripping wet, and the other disciples were damp from being out on the lake in a boat. They were exhausted, and there seems to have been very little conversation. But in addition to the quiet time of eating food together, the “fire of

coals” (John 21:9) by the lake, must have reminded Peter of the “fire of coals” in the courtyard at the high priest’s palace, before which he denied several times that he even knew the Lord.

As breakfast was concluding, Jesus turned to Peter and began to speak. He said to Peter, in essence: “Do you love me more than these (that is, these other disciples)?” Peter had said that he would never fall away, no matter what the others did (Mark 14:29). Peter responded to Jesus’ question by saying, “Thou knowest that I love thee” (John 21:15). A second time Jesus said in essence to Peter, “Do you love me?” And Peter said, “Thou knowest that I love thee” (verse 16). And Jesus asked the question again (a third time) in verse 17.

When *Jesus* asked the question, “Do you love me?” (“Lovest thou me?”), He used the verb form of “agape” — the higher God-like love described in 1 Corinthians 13. When *Peter* answered each time, *he* used the lesser Greek word “phileo” — the love of a friend or family member. In the third question, *Jesus came down to Peter’s word*. He said, “Do you even love me as a friend?” Peter’s confidence was greatly shaken by his three denials, and so *he was hesitant* to use the strong word for love (agapao), and chose to use the weaker word, (phileo). Then Peter said (in verse 17), “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.”

Earlier, Peter had denied Jesus while standing beside a fire; now, beside another fire, Peter was restored publicly. Three times Peter said that he did not even know the Lord; now, three times over he said that he loved the Lord!

This little encounter, recorded in John 21, reaffirmed Peter’s relationship with Christ. Jesus, in effect, says, “Your mistakes in the past were sad mistakes — but that was yesterday. Now you must take your eyes from yesterday and focus them on tomorrow. Tomorrow there will be multitudes needing to hear the Word of God. *You feed them!*” Jesus said to Peter, “Feed my sheep.”

Yesterday is gone beyond recall. Tomorrow awaits proof of your love for the Savior — by your continuing to faithfully serve Him. Peter genuinely repented. Jesus completely forgave. And after Peter was restored by Jesus, he was greatly used of God. Only a few weeks later, he preached the powerful sermon at Pentecost.

Most of us know what it’s like. There’s a place where something happened — something we’re ashamed of — and we sincerely regret. Sometimes we’re troubled by our conscience, but like Peter, it is possible to acknowledge our transgressions — and we too can be restored into a right relationship with God!

There are a number of practical applications in the lesson:

1) We see what a fearful enemy the Devil is to believers. Satan desires to have us that he may sift us as wheat. We tend not to think seriously enough about the personality, the activity, and the power of the Devil. Jesus calls Satan “the prince of this world,” a “murderer,” and a “liar.” Peter later in life said that Satan is like a “roaring lion . . . seeking whom he may devour.” John calls him “the accuser of the brethren.” We must never be ashamed to say that we believe the devil is very real.

2) We must always be grateful that Jesus is a mighty Friend who is at the right hand of God, ever living to make intercession for us. Jesus said to Peter, “I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.” Our enemies are mighty; our strength is small; the world is full of snares; our hearts are weak. We would

never reach Heaven if it had not been that Jesus continues to appear in the presence of God, doing for us what He did for Peter.

3) The steps by which believers fall into sin usually start small, and are gradual. The first step in Peter's denial of Jesus was his boastful self-confidence. That was followed by mingling with bad company. That was followed by being a simple coward in the presence of accusing men and women. We must remember that *the ridicule of the world* now, is nothing compared with *the displeasure of God* in the Day of Judgment.

4) Giving in to Satan's sifting often starts with a small misdemeanor. Bobby Leach startled the world with his daring stunts. He one time tumbled over Niagara Falls in a wooden barrel. Some years later he slipped on an orange peel, fell to the ground, and suffered a severe broken leg. Often a small, insignificant circumstance can cause a great fall.

5) We can *deny Jesus* like Peter did:

- when we consent to a dishonest business deal
- when we fail to stand for what is right and good
- or, when we have opportunity to discuss a moral issue, and we say nothing

We can *stand up for Jesus*:

- when we reserve the Lord's Day for worship and rest
- when we refuse to retaliate against those who misuse us
- when we decline to participate in obscene talk

6) The Bible makes no effort to hide the weak side of Peter's character. In our lesson, Simon Peter denied the Lord Jesus, and yet two months later, he preached the sermon at Pentecost and 3,000 people were saved. The strong leader which Peter became in the Book of Acts is a powerful testimony to the transforming grace of God in his life. And what the Lord has done for others, He can do for you!

After Peter experienced the Lord's restoration, he was reminded that his death (like the matter of death for all of us) — is in the hands of our Maker (John 21:18-23).

There is, in this passage, a prophecy about the martyrdom of Peter, which would occur when he was an older man. But when Peter was told what would happen to him later in life, he became very curious about John — and he asked Jesus what would happen to *John*.

Jesus answered, in effect, "What I choose to do with John is not your business." God has a future course mapped out for each of us. He knows what kind of death will be most valuable in bringing glory to Him.

In light of the traditional historical accounts of how the Twelve Disciples died, we say: Happy are those who die as John died — naturally in old age — and honored are those who die as Peter died — unnaturally by crucifixion. And perhaps some who are alive now will not experience death at all! The words of Jesus in John 21:22 are intended to be a lesson in trust, and in contentment with God's plan for our individual lives.

No matter what our situation is in life, as believers in Christ, the call of Jesus to us is, *You are to follow Me* — essentially the same call that was given to Peter in John 21:22. The command, “Follow thou me” is a present imperative, which means that the command literally says, “You are to *keep on* following me.”

Following Jesus includes accepting His views about the authority of the Scriptures (Matthew 22:31b), the way of salvation through Jesus alone (John 14:6), the concept of separation from sinners (Hebrews 7:26), the need to forgive those who offend (Matthew 6:14-15), and the nature of life in the hereafter (John 5:28-29).

Jesus’ question in verse 23: “*If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?*” — is one of the few references in the Gospel of John to the Second Coming of Jesus. The other clear reference to the Lord’s coming is given in John 14:1-3. Whether or not we survive until Jesus returns — we are to serve Him faithfully, and to live and work day after day, keeping in mind that He might appear at any moment.

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