

# The Shame of Peter's Denials

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Mark 14:66–72  
Frank Walker, Ph.D.

Jesus had predicted earlier in this chapter that Peter would deny him three times. Verse 30 says, *And Jesus saith unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this day, even in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice.* Although Peter insisted he would never do this, he did it anyway.

Contrary to secular humanism, which claims that man is a tower of strength and wisdom, the Bible isn't ashamed to expose our sins and weaknesses. It does so over and over. Think of Jacob, Moses, David and Solomon. Even the New Testament describes Jesus' disciples as men who were slow to learn, more interested in advancing their own glory than understanding his suffering, and ready to flee at the drop of a hat.

We're no different. In 2 Corinthians, where Paul said that God puts his treasure in frail, earthen vessels, he meant preachers of the gospel, but what he wrote applies to every one of us. We're all weak and feeble, susceptible to fail at any time. That's why we need the grace of Jesus Christ and the work of his Holy Spirit in our lives. Our catechism reminds us to beg these things from him continually.

Peter didn't do this, even though Jesus told him to. He said, *Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak* (v. 38). But Peter didn't draw his strength from the Lord, and he failed miserably. He denied the very one who had come into the world to suffer and die for his sins. And he didn't deny him just once, but three times.

## Three or Six Denials?

Before we consider the details found in today's text, I first want to say a little about the number of Peter's denials.

When Jesus told Peter that he would deny him, he always said he would deny him *thrice* or three times. This is the testimony of Matthew, Mark and Luke (Matt. 26:34; Mark 14:30; Luke 22:34). John's gospel doesn't give us a number at all. But in recent years, many commentators have concluded that Peter actually denied Jesus six times, not three. I suspect that this idea comes from Harold Lindsell's book, *The Battle for the Bible*. But why do they say this? It all has to do with the

supposed inconsistencies of the gospel accounts. For example, in Matthew and Luke Jesus told Peter he would deny him three times before the cock crowed, but in Mark Jesus said that Peter would deny him three times before the cock crowed twice. The word *twice* is the problem. So, according to these commentators, Peter denied Jesus three times and then the cock crowed once, then he denied him three more times and the cock crowed again. They also point out other inconsistencies in the gospels, viz., whether Peter's second denial was spoken to a man or woman, whether he made his third denial to a group or an individual, and where Peter was at different times.

As I plan to show shortly, I don't believe any of these so-called problems are unsolvable. And I also think it's important to know why this has become an issue to start with. The fact that Jesus told Peter he would deny him three times before the cock crowed twice isn't a problem for us because our translation says that the cock crowed once in verse 68, i.e., after Peter denied Jesus the first time, and again after Peter's third denial in verse 72. However, the manuscripts most translations rely on, which most commentators do their exegesis from, don't have the phrase, *And the cock crew*, in verse 68 or the word *twice* in verse 72. Without these words, we're left with Jesus predicting that the cock would crow twice but no fulfillment of it. We can't explain why Jesus said it. Either Mark made a mistake, or we have to assume things that aren't in the text, or we have to conclude that Peter denied Jesus six times instead of three.

This is the kind of mess Christians make for themselves when they don't have a solid view of the text of Scripture. They have to resort to extreme opinions and ridiculous explanations to deal with problems that aren't really there.

## First Denial

Now, let's examine Peter's first denial of Jesus in verses 66 through 68. Here's what Mark wrote: *And as Peter was beneath in the palace, there cometh one of the maids of the high priest: and when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked upon him, and said, And thou also wast with Jesus of Nazareth. But he denied, saying, I know not, neither understand I what thou sayest. And he went out into the porch; and the cock crew.*

The first thing we note here is Peter's location: *he was beneath in the palace*, i.e., in the courtyard of Caiaphas' palace, just below the second-story window where the trial was just getting underway. In fact, John's gospel suggests that this took place while Jesus was with Annas, Caiaphas' father-in-law, and not with Caiaphas. They probably lived in the same house.

Anyway, while Peter was lumbering around in the courtyard, and trying to keep himself warm by the fire, *one of the maids of the high priest* walked over to him and looked at him. Actually,

according to the Greek, she stared at him. Mark used the same word here that the angels used when they found the disciples gazing into heaven after Jesus ascended (Acts 1:11). The maid studied Peter because she thought she recognized him as a follower of Jesus Christ. She announced, *And thou also wast with Jesus of Nazareth.*

Peter immediately denied knowing and following Jesus. He said he didn't know what this maid was talking about.

All four gospels say the same thing concerning this denial, viz., that Peter denied Jesus to a young woman. They all identify this woman as a female slave, using exactly the same word. But we know one more thing about her. John also described her as *the damsel that kept the door* (John 18:17), i.e., she was the one who had opened the gate of the courtyard earlier that night to let John and Peter in. She thought she recognized Peter. She wanted to confirm her suspicion.

But for us, the fact that Peter denied Jesus to a slave girl means something more. It means Peter had no reason to lie to her. Even if she had wanted to report him, she probably couldn't have done so and no one would have listened to her, anyway. And she had no reason to say anything. Why would she have wanted to help Caiaphas?

Yet, despite this woman's inability and/or unwillingness to say anything, Peter denied knowing Jesus. He wasn't afraid of her; he had no reason to be. But it wasn't her he was concerned with. He was thinking of Jesus. He denied Jesus because he was ashamed to own him as his Lord. According to Luke's account, he even claimed not to know who Jesus was despite him being the main topic of everyone's conversation for three and a half years (Luke 22:57).

As soon as Peter denied the Lord, Mark says the cock crowed the first time.

## Second Denial

The second of Peter's denials is a bit more complicated. Here's Mark's account of it in verses 69 and 70: *And a maid saw him again, and began to say to them that stood by, This is one of them. And he denied it again.*

But why is this more challenging? Two reasons.

The first challenge here is to figure out who Peter was talking to when he denied Jesus this time. Mark said, *A maid saw him again.* The word *again* suggests that it was the same maid as before. The Greek supports this because it has a definite article — “The maid saw him again,” not just *a maid*. But Matthew explicitly wrote that it was *another maid* (Matt. 26:71). Luke complicated this even

more by using a masculine pronoun, suggesting that Peter spoke with a man (Luke 22:58). And John uses the plural *they* (John 18:25).

I don't think this is much of a problem. John's plural pronoun clearly shows that more than one person spoke to Peter, and even Mark wrote that the maid spoke to those who stood by. So, one person in this group was a man. Another was the same maid who had witnessed Peter's first denial. And another was a different maid, perhaps one who had been sent to relieve the first maid. Maybe there were even more people there. We don't know. But the two females were both slaves. It's likely that the man was, too.

So, again, Peter had no reason to lie, except for the simple fact that he didn't want to be identified with Jesus Christ.

The second challenge here is to figure out where Peter was when he denied Jesus this time. Matthew wrote that he had *gone out into the porch* (Matt. 26:71), presumably leaving the warmth of the fire, but John said that he was standing by the fire (John 18:25). There's really no inconsistency here, though. Peter could have been in one place when the conversation started and in another when it ended. Or, even more likely, there was more than one fire in the courtyard. Considering the number of men who went out to arrest Jesus, it would have been impossible for all of them to keep warm at the same fire.

## Third Denial

Peter's third denial, according to Luke 22:59, took place about an hour after the second. Peter had had plenty of time to think about what he had done. Apparently, he hadn't. Anyway, Mark described his third denial like this: *And a little after, they that stood by said again to Peter, Surely thou art one of them: for thou art a Galilaean, and thy speech agreeth thereto. But he began to curse and to swear, saying, I know not this man of whom ye speak.*

This raises the same question as before, viz., who was Peter talking to? Matthew and Mark both wrote that he spoke to those who were standing near him, i.e., others in the courtyard. But Luke mentioned only one person, saying nothing at all about a group. Maybe the man he mentioned was the spokesman for the group (Luke 22:59). John also mentioned only one person, identifying him specifically as *one of the servants of the high priest, being his kinsman whose ear Peter cut off* (John 18:26). It's unclear, though, whether John and Luke had the same person in mind. Certainly, more than one person could have asked Peter about his affiliation with Jesus.

But Peter denied knowing Jesus again. He didn't want to be associated with him.

But something else stands out here. Peter had been warming himself by the fire that night, but his body wasn't the only thing getting hot. So was his temper. When the first maid asked him about Jesus, he simply denied knowing him. But when the second maid and her friends asked the same question, he denied knowing Jesus with an oath. That is, he put himself under God's own testimony. And it was even worse with his third denial. This time, according to Mark, *he began to curse and to swear*. Here the word translated *curse* is *anathema*, showing that Peter knew that his false declaration would condemn him. He understood the precariousness of his situation he was putting himself in.

This is how sin works. It brings God's chastisement into our lives, often manifesting itself as chaos and disorder and loss. When we fail to deal with it, we start looking like the ungodly in Psalm 1. Do you remember what David wrote about them? He said that they're *like the chaff which the wind driveth away*. They can't stand in the judgment or in the congregation of the righteous. They perish in their iniquity (Ps. 1:4–6). This is not where we want to be.

As soon as Peter denied Jesus the third time, the cock crowed a second time. Everything Jesus predicted came true. Peter did exactly what Jesus said he would do. He denied knowing him three times, even though he said he would never forsake him, even if everyone else did.

One thing that stands out in our text is that Peter never lost sight of Jesus. Whenever someone asked him if he knew him, he thought to himself, "I don't want to admit that I do." So, three times he looked away.

But there was one time he couldn't look away. According to Luke, after the cock crowed the last time, *the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter* (Luke 22:61). Jesus' trial before Caiaphas and Peter's trial of faith ended at the same time. Peter the rock proved to be nothing more than a pile of sand, while Jesus, who had been beaten and abused, remained firm. Can you imagine what the look did to Peter? I don't know about you, but if I had been in his shoes, I'm sure I would have crumbled on the spot.

There's only one thing to do in times like these, and that's to keep looking to Jesus. Hebrews 12 says, *Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God* (vv. 1–2). Amen.