

## Steps to Backsliding

**Text:** Mark 14:66-72

### Introduction:

1. As we read of Peter's three-fold denial of Christ, we ask ourselves, "how did Peter get to this point in his Christian walk where he would deny his Lord and Saviour? What led to such a terrible failure in Peter's life?" To answer this question, we need to go back and trace Peter's steps from the Upper Room, to the High Priest's palace. We will see that Peter's denial of Christ was the climax of a number of steps he took into a backslidden state.
2. Illustration: Peter's collapse was "like the collapse of a great building. First one part gives way, then another part gives way, and then another and another part gives way until at last the whole building lied in a heap." (John Butler)
3. Peter's example serves as an instructive warning to all of us as we are all prone to the sin of backsliding. We will consider this period in Peter's life in two stages: 1. The Steps to Peter's Backsliding. 2. The Steps to Peter's Rebuilding

### I. THE STEPS IN PETER'S BACKSLIDING (VS. 29-31; 37-41; 47-50; 54; 66-71)

We can discern 7 steps in Peter's journey into spiritual catastrophe:

#### A. Step 1 – Trusting in Self (Vs. 29-31)

1. It appears Christ issued 2 warnings – one in the Upper Room (Luke) and one on the way to the garden (Matthew and Mark). Peter was particularly a focus of these warnings on account of his self-confidence and leadership amongst the other disciples. Peter failed to heed Christ's warnings. Pride has a way of making us deaf to warnings.
2. Peter was self-confident – he was trusting in self, believing he was able to face the challenge and succeed. Undoubtedly Peter was absolutely sincere in this claim but sincerity alone does not equal spirituality if not coupled with other principles.
3. Peter was self-inflated – he claimed that though all the other disciples might desert Christ, he would not. This was shocking pride on the part of Peter to elevate Himself above the other disciples. God in His mercy would allow Peter to experience a real breaking of the self-life in order that he might be a usable vessel. **Peter must learn to die to self if Peter would live for Christ.**
4. Matthew Henry: "There is a proneness in good men to be overconfident of their own strength and stability. We are ready to think ourselves able to grapple with the strongest temptations, to go

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through the hardest and most hazardous services, and to bear the greatest afflictions for Christ; **but it is because we do not know ourselves.**”

5. Self-confidence and self-reliance in our ability to live the Christian life is the first step toward backsliding. The Word of God warns in Proverbs 16:1, “Pride *goeth* before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.”
6. Self-reliance will always end in disappointment and failure in the Christian life. God will not bless or honour our self-efforts. The **ONLY** way to live the Christian life is by reliance upon Christ for **EVERYTHING**. Jesus said in John 15:5, “...for without me ye can do **nothing**.” We need to live by the truth of Gal. 2:20 “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; **yet not I, but Christ liveth in me**: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”
7. Butler: “A true recognition of our weakness is our strength, for it will cause us to cast ourselves upon the Lord for help – and that is the only way we will ever stand in trying times.”

### B. Step 2 – Sleeping in Complacency (Vs. 37-41)

Self-reliance leads to spiritual apathy and complacency. It produces a false sense of security about my spiritual state to where I don't sense my need of Christ.

1. Christ's Questions (Vs. 37)

Christ asks Peter two searching questions:

  - a. “Simon, sleepest thou? = This is the first time Peter has been called by his old name since chapter 3:16. This should have been an alert to Peter that he was walking according to the old man.
  - b. “couldst not thou watch one hour?” = What a challenging and searching question! In essence Christ was saying “Peter, can't you even give one hour to watchful prayer at this critical moment?” Can you be counted upon to watch and pray?
2. Christ's Exhortations (Vs. 38)
  - a. An exhortation to **watchfulness** (Vs. 38a)
    - i. The word ‘watch’ means to be ‘vigilant’ (1 Peter 5:8), it means to be ‘watchful’ (Rev. 3:2).
    - ii. A lack of spiritual vigilance and soberness is a sure symptom of spiritual sleepiness and apathy in our lives.
  - b. An exhortation to **prayerfulness** (Vs. 38b)
    - i. This was a critical **moment** and they needed to be spiritually awake. The sleepy Christian doesn't know what **hour** it is. He doesn't discern the spiritual battle that is raging around him. Prayerlessness is another symptom of spiritual slumber in our lives.

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- ii. Prayer expresses the opposite attitude to that of self-reliance. Prayer is an expression of God-reliance, an admission of our desperate need of God in all things.
- iii. “lest ye enter into temptation” = spiritual vigilance and prayerfulness is needed before temptation strikes. Very often we coast along in spiritual lethargy and then when we are in the grip of a temptation, cry out to God. Sadly, it is often too late as the temptation has got us in its grip. The time to prepare is before the temptation comes!
- iv. “the spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak” = Christ puts His finger on the internal struggle they were facing. In spirit, they desired to do what Christ was asking but their bodies were compelling them to do otherwise.
- v. This conflict is described in Galatians 5:17 “For the flesh **lusteth against** the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” It is like a spiritual tug of war going on in our hearts. The phrase “are contrary the one to the other” according to A.T. Robertson means “lined up in conflict, face to face, a spiritual duel.”
- vi. We all need to be aware of the enemy **within** who will seek to thwart our spiritual progress. If we follow the impulses of the body, we will be very weak, unstable believers – up for the Lord one moment and down the next. The solution is to bring our bodies under subjection (1 Cor. 9:27), deny self (Matt. 16:24), yield to the Spirit rather than the impulses of our sinful flesh (Gal. 5:16), and to apply the cross to the self-life (Gal. 2:20; 5:24).

### C. Step 3 – Serving in Carnality (Vs. 47)

1. Self-confidence, self-reliance and self-ambition lead to serving according to one’s own wisdom and strength. Such service only causes damage to Christ’s cause and injures others! Christ had to do a miracle to reverse Peter’s damage.
2. Christ made it clear that his cause would never be advanced at the edge of a sword of steel but rather by the sword of the Spirit (Matt. 26:52-54; Eph. 6:17)
3. Our service can come from one of two sources – the flesh or the Spirit. Peter was serving in the arm of the flesh. He was trying to live up to his prideful claim he had made a little earlier. There was a self-centeredness about all of this. As much as it may have appeared on the surface that this act of Peter was about His Saviour, it was really more about Peter and Peter’s pride.
4. Challenge: The self-life can so easily get mixed up in our service for Christ. Sincere love and motivation for Christ can get confusingly

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mixed in with selfish motives, producing inner turmoil in the life of the believer. May God help us to keep self out of our service!

### D. Step 4 – Surrendering in Conflict (Vs. 50)

1. This verse records the sad reality of Peter and the other disciples' unpreparedness to meet the spiritual battle that confronted them in the garden.
2. Spiritual defeats are inevitable when we are walking in the strength of the self-life.

### E. Step 5 – Following from a Distance (Vs. 54a)

1. The physical distance between Peter and Christ was representative of the spiritual distance from fellowship with Christ at this point in Peter's life.
2. Why did Peter follow afar off?
  - a. Because of the natural drive of self-preservation. The self-life will never lead you in the direction of death. That is why God in His wisdom and love did the work for us and nailed our old man to the cross when Christ died (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20).
  - b. To follow Christ on the Calvary road would mean a cross for Peter too. It would mean shame, reproach, misunderstanding and pain. It would mean death to his own dreams and aspirations and possibly even literal death as one of Christ's followers.
  - c. Luke 9:23 "And he said to *them* all, If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and **take up his cross daily**, and follow me."
  - d. The attempt to save oneself (self-preservation) only leads to loss. Mark 8:35 "For whosoever will save his life **shall lose it**; but whosoever **shall lose his life** for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it."
  - e. Jim Elliot: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."
3. The Christian life is not about an arm's length type of followership. It is about following Christ fully and bearing His reproach. Hebrews 13:13 "Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, **bearing his reproach.**"
4. Following Christ afar off is perilous business. You make easy pickings for the devil. Amalek of old attacked those at the 'hindmost' (the rear of all the others) of Israel in their pilgrimage to the promised land (Deut. 25:18). Amalek particularly targeted those who were weak – "even all that were feeble behind thee". Don't be content to stay spiritually weak and drift along behind the Lord at a distance. You are dangerously exposed to the enemy's attacks.

### F. Step 6 – Sitting in Compromise (Vs. 54b)

1. In a compromised place – "at the fire". Those who follow Christ from a distance very soon find themselves in compromised places in the world. It gets cold and dark lagging behind Christ on the Calvary road.

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Backslidden Christians begin to seek out warmth in the wrong places such as:

- a. The false warmth of worldliness – e.g., ungodly lifestyle (e.g., drinking, dress, friends), worldly entertainments (e.g., music and movies)
  - b. The false fire of compromised Christianity that uses substitutes to the genuine power that comes with a separated, crucified, Spirit-filled life. E.g., compromised worship, corrupt versions etc...
  - c. There is no substitute to the fire of the Holy Ghost working in our lives. Don't linger afar off by the false fires of compromise. Get into the blazing light and heat of God's Pure Presence!
2. With a compromised people – “and he sat with the servants”
- a. When you follow Christ afar off, you end up hanging around the wrong crowd! Instead of seeking out the fellowship of God's people, you start to make your unsaved friends, family and work colleagues your close companions. “Peter's drifting from Christ eventually led to his drifting from the company of his fellow Christians to be in company with the world. Anytime your fellowship with the Lord and his people begins to wane, you will sooner or later move into the company of the ungodly.” Luke 22:55 “Peter sat down among them.”
  - b. 2 Cor. 6:17-18 “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”
  - c. The Bible warns, 1 Cor. 15:33 “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.” Prov. 13:20 “He that walketh with wise *men* shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed.”

### G. Step 7 – Denying the Saviour (Vs. 66-71)

1. Denial 1 (Vs. 66-68)
  - a. Peter's denials likely occurred over a two-hour period from about 1-3am.
  - b. The maid came and “looked upon him”. The word ‘looked’ means “to look intently, to inspect.” (Phillips)
  - c. “neither understand I what thou sayest” = Peter went so far as to claim ignorance of what she was even saying.
2. Denial 2 (Vs. 68b-70a)
  - a. Peter moves “out into the porch” meaning that he “withdrew from the fire to the forecourt, the covered archway opening onto the street.” (Phillips)
  - b. Mark notes the first crow of the cock – “and the cock crew”. The sound reached Peter's ears but it failed to register a warning in

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his mind and heart. When we are backslidden, we often don't pick up the warning signals God sends our way.

- c. John Phillips: "Peter no longer needed a fire to keep warm; he was sweating enough without it!"
3. Denial 3 (Vs. 70b-71)
  - a. "they that stood by" = "Peter's identity had now become a matter of general discussion." (Hiebert) According to John, a relative of Malchus recalled seeing Peter in the garden – "One of the servants of the high priest, being *his* kinsman whose ear Peter cut off, saith, Did not I see thee in the garden with him?" (John 18:26)
  - b. "thy speech" = Peter's speech made clear his Galilean origin (Matt. 26:73).
  - c. "curse and swear" = the phrase "to curse" means "to anathematize", to place oneself or another under a curse. Peter was calling down the curse of God upon himself if he were not telling the truth. "To swear" means "to take an oath" (Hiebert), to "make a solemn pledge of truthfulness" (Macarthur).
  - d. The cock crew for the second time right as Peter was denying Christ with oaths. Luke adds, "while he yet spake" (Lk. 22:60).
4. Challenge: At its heart, Peter's failure was a failure to publicly affirm His allegiance to Christ, to publicly identify himself as a follower of Jesus Christ. "On each occasion, Peter was challenged to declare his true relationship to Jesus, but each time, he failed to give brave witness to his Lord and basely denied Him." (Edmond Hiebert) When we are backslidden, we end up denying Christ to one degree or another. Denial comes in many forms. You no longer speak for Christ.

## II. THE STEPS TO PETER'S REBUILDING (VS. 72; LUKE 24:34; 1 COR. 15:5; JOHN 21:15-17)

If it was up to us to make an assessment at this point, we would probably conclude that this marked the end for Peter so far as a fruitful life of service for Christ was concerned. We would conclude that Peter would remain on the sidelines of the Christian life from here on. But come with me less than two months later and see the same Peter on the day of Pentecost. Hear the power of his preaching and see the 3,000 souls saved. See his boldness and courage before the Jewish Sanhedrin (Acts 4)! Peter's testimony is a reminder to us that failures in the Christian life don't have to be the end of the story for us. We serve the God of the second chance! As there were certain steps that lead Peter into failure, so there are several key steps that lead to his restoration.

### A. Conviction (Vs. 72a; Luke 22:61)

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Peter was convicted by:

1. His Saviour's Word – "Peter called to mind the word the word that Jesus said unto him". The Word of God returned to Peter's mind and convicted him of his error. To recover spiritually, we must yield to the convicting influence of the Word of God when like a sharp sword, it points out the error of our ways.
2. His Saviour's Look – Luke records that at that very moment, Jesus "turned and looked upon Peter" (Lk. 22:61). That one penetrating look from the tender, loving, all knowing eyes of Christ melted Peter. Christ did not have to say anything to Peter. That look was enough. It was a sermon in itself and reached his wayward heart.

### B. Contrition (Vs. 72b; Luke 22:62)

There are two parts to Peter's contrition:

1. Reflection – "And when he thought thereon". Peter gave consideration to the error of his ways in light of Christ's Word.
2. Repentance – "he wept". Luke says he "wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). "Peter fell to weeping with vehemence; with an awaked mind and a broken heart Peter continued to sob for a long time." (Hiebert)
  - a. This was godly sorrow that led to repentance (2 Cor. 7:10). The first step to recovery from backsliding is brokenness. Psalm 51:17 "The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit: a **broken** and a **contrite** heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."
  - b. Peter's response was that of a genuine believer. Judas felt remorse and committed suicide whereas Peter felt remorse and repented. McGee: "Peter could repent of his sin, and that is a real test of a genuine believer."

### C. Commission (John 21:15-17)

1. Christ took the initiative in Peter's restoration. Peter was one of the first to see Christ after His resurrection (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5). Surely this was an act of forgiveness on the part of our Lord.
2. In grace and mercy Christ afforded Peter the opportunity to affirm His love and loyalty to Christ three times – one for each of his three denials.
3. The Lord had a job for Peter to do – "feed my sheep". Restoration in fellowship leads to restoration in service.

**Conclusion:** Where are you on the backsliding slide? Will you like Peter, turn to Christ in humble repentance for His forgiveness and restoration? Take Peter's advice – "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:" (1 Peter 5:6)