

The Restoration of a Sinning Saint

Scripture: Matthew 26:58, 69-75

Code: 2391

We come to the study of the Word of God in Matthew, chapter 26, again this morning; a very familiar story, the story of the denial of Peter the apostle. This week, as I studied this particular text of Scripture, I was impressed with a new thought, a new perception in regard to this rather sad and tragic story. And that is that I think, in my own heart, this may be one of the most encouraging, one of the most hopeful of all biblical accounts. We normally look at Peter's denial of Jesus Christ as a great tragedy, and indeed it is. But there's another side to this. There is a remarkable and exhilarating side to this, a thrilling one, and I hope that that will unfold for you as we look at it this morning. It did for me in such a way as for the first time in my life of studying this story, I could see it as a positive, exciting, hopeful, encouraging account. And I want it to be that for you.

I asked myself a question: what is the single greatest gift God could ever give? And the answer to that question, obviously, from Scripture, is the forgiveness of sins. There would be no salvation without the forgiveness of sins. There would be no relationship to God without the forgiveness of sins. There would be no entering into heaven unless our sins were forgiven. We would know no usefulness to the Lord without the forgiveness of sin. We would know no relief from guilt without the forgiveness of sin. The greatest single thing that God has ever offered to man is the forgiveness of sin. That is why, in Exodus 34, when Moses said, "I want to see You, God," the Lord said, "I am the Lord, Lord God, and I am merciful, and I am gracious, and I pardon iniquity," and He went on to describe His gracious sin-forgiving character. And the prophet Micah says, "Who is a pardoning God like Thee?" And the apostle John says, "If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, keeps on cleansing us from all sin. And if we confess our sins, He is faithful and still righteous to forgive us, to keep on cleansing us."

Forgiveness of sin, cleansing from sin is the single greatest gift that God has ever offered to man, and that is exactly what we see in this passage. I don't think that any saint in scriptural record ever sank to the depths of sin that Peter did on this occasion. And the wonder of wonders is that even in the extremity of his sin, the Lord was there to forgive him. That is a hopeful truth. All of us as Christians experience times when we come before the Lord overwhelmingly impressed with our own sinfulness; if we don't, we've grown very cold and may not even be Christians. But for those who know the Lord, and who walk in His will, and in the light of His Word, and in the power of His Spirit, there are those constant times when we become aware of our sinfulness, and in a sense of brokenness, come to the Lord, and find the forgiveness that heals the soul and brings joy. Such was the experience of Peter. And the depth of his sin gives God an opportunity to show the profound extent of His forgiveness. For

Peter, who fell so deeply, was soon after restored to become the leading spokesman of the early church, and the great leader that we see in the first twelve chapters of the book of Acts. So it is a hopeful, hopeful record, a thrilling and encouraging story, for all of us who are sinners saved by His grace.

Now, in order to understand the text before us, which is verse 69 through 75, the last paragraph of chapter 26, we need to back up. We need to realize that woven through the tapestry of the arrest and trial of Christ is this denial of Peter, and it has been coming all along. It isn't as if it happened spontaneously; there are reasons why it happened. And when you begin to read verse 69, and you find Peter in the courtyard, and someone comes to him and identifies him with Jesus, and he denies it, and later someone else comes, and he denies it, and someone else comes, and he denies it, and you say to yourself, "How could it happen?" You only need to back up in the text to find the answer; a sequence of things.

Now, we begin in verse 31, with what we might call the sinner's boast – the sinner's boast. They had just sung an hymn, says verse 30, and gone out into the Mount of Olives, that is the Lord and the eleven disciples. Judas was already gone off to work out the betrayal details, and he would appear a little later in the garden, leading the entourage that came to capture Christ. But Jesus and the eleven disciples have finished the Passover meal, the institution of the Lord's Supper, the teaching recorded in John 13 to 16, the wonderful high priestly prayer of John 17. The Lord has said all and done all that He desired to do. He had ended the old covenant with the final authorized Passover. He has instituted the new covenant with His own table. He has given them great, sweeping truth on which to base their lives until He returns. And now He goes to the garden to pray and to be taken captive. And as they are going along toward the Mount of Olives, Jesus said to them, verse 31, "All of you shall be offended because of Me this night; for it is written" – and He quotes from Zechariah – "I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad." Jesus predicts their defection. He predicts that they will all forsake Him in the midst of His trial. "But after I am raised up again," verse 32 says, "I will go before you into Galilee." Then He predicts His own resurrection, and the regathering of His scattered disciples. They will forsake Him in the moment of His trial. I don't mean His mock trial; I mean the trial, the struggle that He underwent in this whole scene. But it won't be the end of the story, because He will be raised again, and regather them to Himself, and lead them into Galilee.

Now, as Jesus predicts the defection of the disciples, Peter responds, and he said in verse 33, "Though all men shall be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended." And Peter rather loudly and vehemently protests the Lord's statement and prediction of the disciples' defection. He says, in effect, everybody else might do it, I will never do it. Based upon his emotional feeling for Christ, based upon his assumed love and attraction to Christ, he felt himself to be invincible. He could not accept the prediction of Jesus. He thought that he had come to the place in his own life where he was mature spiritually, where his priorities were cast in concrete, where he was somewhat

invulnerable to the onslaughts of Satan, the world, the flesh. And he couldn't imagine any circumstance or any difficulty that could cause him in any way to defect and deny the Lord Jesus Christ. His emotional impulses just couldn't communicate that to his mind. There was no pressure that could be that great. And so here we see him rather boastfully saying, "You're wrong, Lord," which takes an awful lot of ego, to confront the word of the living God and say, "You're wrong," but that's what he did.

And so we are confronted then, in verses 31 to 33, with the sinner's boast. Immediately after that, we see the sinner's defiance. In verse 34, "The Lord said, 'Truly, I say unto you that this night before the cock crows,'" and Mark adds that He said "before the cock crows twice" and Jesus was very specific, "you will deny Me three times." Jesus goes back to even a stronger statement, and not about the whole group but just about Peter, and says, "On the contrary, not only will you not stand true to Me" – as over against all the other disciples – "but you will go one step worse than they do; you will deny Me three times before the cock can crow twice." In verse 35 we see Peter's defiance. Peter said unto Him, "Though I should die with You, yet will I not deny You." And his courageous verbiage swept everybody else up, and all the other disciples said the same thing. Now, the Lord in verse 34 says, "You will deny Me," and uses a strong verb that means to completely deny, and Peter just cannot accept that. He persistently defies the word of the Lord. It's quite remarkable. And in Mark 14:31, Mark writes that he vehemently protested this. It wasn't a mild protestation, it was a vehement one. "I will die first," he says, which is the ultimate and extreme act of courage.

And so we understand, then, that on Thursday evening, Peter has pledged great courage, even to the point of death. He boasts and he even defies the word of the Lord. It's quite remarkable. This guy really had a strong personality and a strong ego to say to the one who uttered the truth, "You are wrong." But that's what he did. And Matthew picks up the flow of Peter's steady decline when they reach the garden in verse 40. They came to the garden on the slope of the Mount of Olives. Jesus went further into the garden, then the disciples, eight of them, stayed by the entrance. Three, Peter, James, and John, went further, and Jesus further than they. And so Jesus goes into a very private place, and when He returns, having asked that they should pray with Him, He finds them in verse 40 asleep. And so He says to Peter, who is their acknowledged leader, "What? Couldn't you watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Now, we know the spirit was willing, Peter had articulated that, hadn't he? And so had all the other disciples affirmed that they were really willing to die for the Lord. But their flesh was not as able as their spirit was willing.

And so He says, "You should be praying," but you see smug, boasting, self-confident disciples don't pray, because they don't need to; you understand that? They have reached the point of invincibility, and they were in the situation where they thought themselves to be absolutely invulnerable. What was there to pray about? And so instead of being alert to the actual reality of the moment – this was "the hour of the power of darkness," Jesus said – instead of being alerted to the fact that hell's forces

never worked harder than they were working in this hour, they simply went to sleep. What did they need with prayer? They had made their vow. They were going to ride it out on their emotions, and their affections, and their attraction to Jesus, and their feelings. They were going to be carried by their verbal commitment.

So we see the sinner's indifference. They are indifferent to the need to pray. The Lord goes back to pray a second time in verse 42, prays, and in verse 43, returns to find them asleep again. In verse 44, He returns to pray, comes back the third time in verse 45, finds them asleep again, says, "Are you sleeping on now and taking your rest?" You're still sleeping. Jesus could already see Judas and the band of temple guard, Roman soldiers, priests coming up the slope toward them, and the disciples were sleeping through all of it, spiritually over-confident, indifferent to the reality of the attack because they were so boastful. The next scene we find in verse 51. And this is the sinner's impulsiveness. Peter is so confident, so defiant, so indifferent, and now we find him, as a result of all of that, acting absolutely on his own. And in verse 51, it says that one of those who was with Jesus – and John tells us it was Peter – drew out a sword, and really started through the whole group. The first guy in line was named Malchus, and he was the servant of the high priest, and he tried to cut off his head and missed and only cut off his ear.

And this is not acting under the instruction of Jesus. This is not what Jesus wanted. Had Peter forgotten the several times in which Jesus had said, "I must go to Jerusalem, and I must be taken captive, and I must lay down My life, and I must rise again?" Had he forgotten that? Did he not want to listen to that? We know he protested against that and said, "Let it not be so, Lord," but even then was letting Satan speak through him. But why couldn't he accept what the will of the Lord was? But not Peter – he acted impulsively, so controlled by his own ego, his own supposed courage, and feeling somewhat invincible, since Jesus was standing next to him, and he knew that Jesus had the power to destroy them all, because moments prior to him taking the sword, you remember, Jesus had knocked them all over to the ground. A thousand of them had fallen to the dirt at the very sound of His name. So Peter knew that he was standing with one who had ultimate power, and he had no fear in that situation because he knew that if the Lord could save him in another situation, walking on water, the Lord could certainly deliver him from these, whom He had knocked down to the ground.

And so he felt invincible, and this just confirmed in his own mind the invincibility he felt was characteristic of his own heart. He took out a sword and started through the whole group, and the Lord stopped him and said, "Put that sword away, unless you want to die by the sword." In other words, if you take a life, they have a right to take your life, that's biblical law. "And don't you know that if I needed it, I could get twelve legions of angels from the Father? But then how would prophecy be fulfilled?" In other words, "Peter, you're out of sync with the plan. Put that sword away." Here is courage, but misguided. Here is zeal, but misdirected. Here is somebody who is so confident and so defiant in terms of listening and hearing what the Lord is saying, and yet who is so zealous that he acts ultimately in an impulsive way that is completely at odds with the plan of God. He's trying to live

up to his press releases. He's trying to show everybody that he's as courageous as he claimed to be. But he's completely out of sync with the plan.

It was his boast, his defiance, his indifference and his impulsiveness that led finally to the sinner's collapse – and that's our text for this morning. His collapse was inevitable because of these prior attitudes. The scene here is very vivid, and I want to give it to you. Go back to verse 58 before we look at verse 69. In verse 57 it says, "They took Jesus captive." We know from the gospel record comparing Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – which we have to do through this whole scene to get the full picture, because each writer focuses on different elements – they took Jesus captive and they tied Him up. They manhandled Him. And then they took Him out of the Garden of Gethsemane with this huge entourage of up to 600 Roman soldiers, several hundred of the Jewish temple guard, priests, and all those who go along with them, and they move Him back down, across the Kidron valley, up the eastern slope of the Mount, and in the gate again, and back to the priest's house. They want to carry out a trial in the middle of the night in the house of the high priest. And so verse 57 says they "led Him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled."

Now, we know from the other gospel records that when they took Jesus back into the high priest's house, He first was taken before Annas, who was the former high priest. John 18 describes the whole scene before Annas. Matthew doesn't describe that. In fact, John is the only one who describes it in detail. Jesus then was taken back to Annas. Now, some have asked the question is that a problem, then, to resolve with this verse, which says they led Him away to Caiaphas? Not at all. Let me tell you why it is not a problem. The high priest would live in a palatial home, and did live in a palatial home in the city of Jerusalem, somewhere near the temple, a massive kind of structure. And it was not uncommon for families to share the same kind of home, or actually the same home. And in this case, no doubt was what had occurred. Annas was the prior high priest. He was deposed by the Romans because he was amassing too much power, and he became a threat to them, so they sat him down, and they allowed others to be put in his place.

One of the others, the one who was now the high priest at this time, was a man named Caiaphas. Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas. It was not uncommon for those high priests to occupy the same home, particularly because they were related to each other. By the way, many other of those priests, high priests, who had succeeded Annas had been his own sons, so it was sort of all in the family. Annas was the power behind the scene. That's why they sent Jesus first to Annas. With his experience and wisdom, surely he could come up with some charge against Jesus that they could use as a basis for the trial before the Sanhedrin, which was conducted by the leader of the Sanhedrin, who was Caiaphas. So when they took Jesus away and led Him to the place where Caiaphas lived, and where the Sanhedrin was assembling in his house, it would be the very same place where Annas lived, so there's really no conflict. The fact that Jesus was led away to Caiaphas would be consistent with the fact that He was led away to Caiaphas and then taken before Annas. Annas no doubt had one wing of the place, Caiaphas had another.

Homes would be constructed along these lines, and you need to know this, because it will make everything else have vivid meaning in your mind as you follow the story. Homes did not face the street. Our houses face the street. You go down the street, and the house faces the street. Houses in that place and time in the world's history faced inwardly. On the street would just be the back wall of the house and a great gate in a palatial home like this, owned by very wealthy, wealthy people. The priests had become wealthy by the corruption in the temple. And as you came to this house, you would come to a great wall, perhaps two, perhaps three stories high. There would be a gate in the middle, and you would enter the gate and go through a corridor that went through the house. It would open to a huge court, and the house would work its way all the way around that court, and all the rooms on all the floors would look into the court.

One great section, no doubt, of that house belonged to Annas. Another great section of that house belonged to Caiaphas, since they were related. And so when Jesus was led away to the place of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, He would be in the very identical place where Annas would confront Him as well. He would be taken first to the apartment or the area where Annas occupied, and He would be brought before Annas. Later on would be transferred over to where Caiaphas, in his part, was meeting together with the Sanhedrin. So there's no conflict at all, and when Matthew says He was led away to Caiaphas the high priest, where those chief priests and elders were collecting together, he is referring to the very same place where Jesus would face Annas as well. Now remember, He faced Annas first, then He was taken to Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin for the second phase of a three-part trial, the third part occurring after dawn in the morning, when they sort of publicly affirmed, according to the rules, during daylight the decision they had made in the middle of the night illegally.

So Jesus is taken away, and He is brought into that great courtyard. All the denials of Peter occur in that same place. John says, in chapter 18, that the first denial occurred while Jesus was before Annas. The other gospel writers tell us that all the denials took place in this courtyard. There's no conflict. Annas and Caiaphas shared the same courtyard, you understand that. So all three denials took place in the same court of the same house of the high priest, parts of which were occupied by both Annas and Caiaphas – a very common and easily understood harmony. Now, I want you to understand how the scene unfolds. In verse 58, here's what happens first of all. Peter followed Him. Although he had fled – all of the disciples fled it says in verse 56, all of them, when Jesus was taken prisoner – he couldn't stay away. He was sort of pulled by the love that he had for the Lord, and so he comes back to follow the Lord. And he follows Him, it says, afar off. He's not brave enough to get close to Him, but he's caught somewhere between love and fear, and he follows at a distance.

You might be interested to know that he wasn't alone. According to John 18:15, accompanying him was another disciple who also followed the Lord. That other disciple was John. That other disciple was known to the high priest. He was known to the high priest, we don't know how, we don't know

what the circumstances were, but it apparently gave him entrance into the high priest's house. So the Lord is brought to the high priest's house, and following along are Peter and John. They really were getting in over their heads; surely Peter was. We have no word of what happened to John. We don't know what happened after he went in. We don't know whether he stayed or whether he left. The text says nothing. But we do know that he didn't deny the Lord. Peter, however, is the scene hero, or anti-hero, however you want to put it. John went on in – you read John 18, verse 16 – because he was known to the high priest. Peter was shut out. He couldn't get in. He didn't have any entrée; he wasn't in the know. John rectified the situation. Apparently John went back out and worked it out with the girl who watched the door to let Peter in; and so Peter got in, and in a sense, John unwittingly contributed to Peter's tragic denial of Christ. John then disappears from the scene. He was there to get access for Peter. He was a part of the unfolding of the plan and the prediction of Christ.

You say, "Why in the world would Christ even predict that Peter would deny Him? Why would the Lord even work it out so he could do it?" Because it was to teach us a profound lesson about spiritual unpreparedness, and even beyond that, beloved, to teach us a profound lesson about the restoration of a sinning saint – a lesson we should rejoice to know about. And so the Lord worked it out so that John had known the high priest, and because of that, no doubt the girl who cared for the door knew him, and said, "Yes, you can have permission," but Peter was left outside. And John went back, resolved that, got Peter in. John disappears from the scene, and Peter becomes the focal point. And so verse 58 says, "He followed Him afar off, unto the high priest's courtyard." He doesn't tell us the part that John does about how he got in. "And he went in and he sat with the guards." Now he's in there and he's sitting with the temple police, the *huprets*, the underlings, the temple guards. No doubt the Roman soldiers from Fort Antonius have gone back to the fort. They did their duty. They got Jesus captured. They got Him into the place of trial before the Jewish high court. The temple police could handle it from there. And they'd perhaps gone back; there may have been a few Roman soldiers there, we don't know.

But Peter comes in and he wants to see the end. You notice that in verse 58? He wanted to see the outcome. He should have known the outcome, the Lord had told him enough times, but he didn't listen very well. He just couldn't walk away. He just couldn't let go of Christ. His love for the Lord was real. It was weak, but it was real, and he couldn't just walk away. He had to know. He had to see what happened. And so he enters the lion's den, and just totally ignores the prediction of Christ that he was going to deny Him, and puts himself right in the hot place where it's going to happen. The Lord was inside before Annas. Maybe Peter could even see Him in there. And Peter was outside, sitting in the court. The other writers tell us "sitting by the fire." There was a fire that night because it was cool. They were keeping warm by the fire. He is in a large crowd of temple police, Sanhedrin members bustling in and out, because they're starting to collect for their part of the trial, after Annas is through. They're moving through, the servants of the house are there, all the dignitaries that make up the coterie of people that surround that high priest system. It's a little before 1:00 AM, and the whole trial's going to last two hours; and in this two hours, Peter's going to hit rock bottom. By 3:00 AM,

which is cock-crow time, it's going to be all over.

So it's a little before one in the morning on Friday, and Peter sits with the soldiers, warms himself, trying to lose himself in the crowd, stay close enough to find out what happens, but not so close he is exposed. And then it happens – we see the sinner's collapse – the sinner's downfall. Peter sat outside in the court, verse 69 says, and a maid, a maid, just a girl. Mark says "one of the maids of the high priest." John says, "one of the maids of the high priest, who was the portress at the door," who cared for the door. Here comes this servant girl, and says, "Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee." You too were with Jesus of Galilee. And Mark adds that she said, "Jesus the Nazarene of Galilee." They loved to use those terms in reference to Jesus, because they were terms of derision. You mock someone when you call them a Nazarene from Nazareth, or a Galilean. The proud citizens of Jerusalem looked down on the people from Galilee. And so she has this hot little bit of information, because maybe she knew John, and so identified Peter with John, and knew John was a follower of Jesus, and now she comes with her little information to impress all of the guards that are sitting around the fire that indeed this is one of the followers of Jesus.

Now, I want you to understand something. This scene is very natural. This scene is very normal. This is a crowd scene. And things that are given to us in the narrative in the text are only initially what we could anticipate occurred. For example, the maid comes and says, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee." But we can be certain that she couldn't just walk up and quietly say that without getting the attention of everybody first. I mean these are soldiers milling around talking, people everywhere. And that's why when you read Matthew and Mark and Luke, you find that the girl is recorded to have said maybe something a little bit different in each place. And it's very likely that in a very natural scene she is saying, "You were one of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth," and may have said it in two or three different ways to get the attention of everybody. She perhaps used several means to express her information. And the response of the men must have come back in several ways as well.

And so when we see a slight variation in what she said, or even in the gospel of John it seems as though he has reversed the first denial and the second, because he's not interested in chronology, we shouldn't be shocked. This is a very natural scene. Look at Peter's reply. She articulates this question, no doubt several different ways, by the time everybody's chimed in and listening. And he denied it, notice, before all; which is to say that she had gotten all of their attention. And his denial is not to this maiden, it is to everybody, who has now been brought into the scene. Now mark this in your mind. Jesus said Peter would deny Him three times. There are no more than three denials. I read a book this week that says there are eight. I don't know how anybody could write a book that says there are eight when Jesus said there are three. What you have to understand is that each of these three occasions of denial, in a very natural way, embraced more than one statement from both sides, so that each is a denial scene in which there must have been a back and forth with dialogue.

So Peter denied it before everybody, saying, "I know not what you say." I don't know what you're talking about. Shocking; this is Peter. It's unbelievable. In Mark, Mark says, "I don't know Him." And John says he said, "I am not." And the truth of it is, he said, "I am not, I don't know Him, you don't know what you're saying" – just a very natural way to respond. So we don't want to become overprotective of the exactness of one book, and say because one says this and the other says another there's a contradiction; not at all. There's a full expression of what went on. In a very natural scene, he was denying before everybody, and he probably did it with several statements, even more than are recorded. You say, "But how could he do this? This is the guy who just said he'd die for Christ. I mean this is the guy who was at the top of any calling any human being could ever know. He was the leader of the twelve. He was given the keys to the kingdom. I mean he is an articulator of the gospel of the kingdom. He is one who has lived with the king. He is a privileged man. He is one who knows Christ who has miracle power. I mean this is Peter, who can heal diseases, as we see in the book of Acts. What in the world is he doing denying Christ? This is not some new convert. This is not somebody who hasn't had a personal acquaintance with Christ, so he may have a little doubt."

And I think to myself, he may have been ready for the big moment. I mean if the Lord had all of a sudden sent for him and said, "Come in to My trial, I want you to speak on My behalf," he might have stood by the Lord and felt invincible, like he did in the garden when the Lord was there, and he took a sword. I mean he may have been ready for the big moment. He may have been ready for the big testimony, and the big opportunity to be a speaker right there beside the Lord, but I'll tell you what he wasn't ready for was the little unexpected thing. And I'm afraid we're like that, too. I mean we may get ready for the Bible study fairly well. We may prepare very well to communicate Christ in a given situation. And we may be able to anticipate certain things that are going to come, and we build up our system to get ready for it. And then all of a sudden we get hit with something we don't expect that knocks us off guard, and we wind up denying Christ. He was ready for the big thing, it was the little one that got him. And the Lord wasn't by his side, either, and he was afraid.

And so he denied what she said before everybody. He denied that he had any identification with Jesus at all. Really frightening – he's reminiscent of Elijah, isn't he? Who goes up on Mount Carmel, takes out a sword and slaughters 450 false priests, and then goes down and hears a woman's after him, and runs out of town. How in the world can you go from such heights of victory to such low points of defeat? I mean here was Peter, who just came out of the upper room experience, where he had seen the end of the old covenant, the initiation of the new covenant; where he had heard promises that had never been heard by any human ears before, and can never be outdone by any given since. This is Peter, who has seen the Lord knock down a whole group of people numbering nearly a thousand to the dirt. This is Peter, who has seen Jesus give an ear to one who had just lost an ear. This is Peter, who has walked on water. I mean this is Peter, who has heard that Jesus will raise from the dead. What in the world is he doing denying Christ? He's a living illustration of the principle given by the apostle Paul, "Let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he" – what – "fall." His own sense of confidence became his undoing. It took only a little doorman to fell the chief of the

twelve. Gone were all his high and heroic protestations to Jesus, gone was his courage that supposedly existed in his heart. From his hand had been snatched the sword, and now out of his heart had been snatched his character, and now there he was, the arrogant coward, unable to confess his heavenly Lord, cringing in lying denial. He was afraid of being arrested. His self-preserving instincts took over, and he denied what he knew was really true.

This is quite remarkable, and is a great insight into spiritual character. Let me tell you something. The thing that reveals character is involuntary response, not planned response. Your character isn't manifest by what you prepare to do, it's manifest by what you're not prepared for, and how you react to that, that involuntary reaction. That shows your character. We can all plan for those spiritual experiences, to some extent. It's those things that catch us off guard and reveal the real weakness of our hearts that tell us who we really are. He was caught off guard. He couldn't get prepared for this one. And his involuntary reaction was one that showed his character to be weak and sinful. And it wasn't just something brand new; it was the result of strong ego, an unwillingness to listen to the word of the Lord, a failure to pray, and an acting utterly on his own impulse, independent of the purpose and plan of God. He was on his own, and on his own he was weak – just like anybody else.

Luke says at this point, Luke 22:58, "And after a little while," then we pick it up in verse 71, "and when he was gone out in to the porch." Now, after denying the Lord by the fire among the temple guards, he can't go immediately away, or it will look like he's a liar, so he hangs around for a little bit. And then he sort of, you know, plays it pretty cool, and just drifts slowly away. He's trying to be coy about all this. And verse 71 says, "He went into the porch," Mark calls it the vestibule. What it was was the corridor that led out to the gate. He may have been heading for the exit. That's not impossible. But there were probably two places to keep warm on a cool night; one would be around the fire, the other would be up in the corridor away from the wind. And so he heads for the corridor. It's darker there, the moonlight won't be as bright, neither will the fire light. So I'll get up there, he says to himself, where I'm not going to have this kind of vulnerability. So he went into the porch, away from potential danger, away from recognition. And Mark, just to keep us on schedule, in Mark 14:68 says, "He went out into the porch and the cock crowed." That was number one time. He has denied the Lord once, the cock has crowed once. He's got two more denials and it will crow the second time. Everything's on schedule.

Peter didn't hear that first one. The crowd, his own tension, he gets into the porch, the corridor, he tries to hide in there in a place of seclusion. But it doesn't work, because verse 71 says no sooner had he gotten there, embarrassed, afraid to be taken prisoner, heading for the exit in case he needs to get out fast – another girl, *allos*, another in the feminine gender, another of the same kind as the other one, another doorman, another girl servant, saw him, and said to them that were there – the crowd there gathered – "This" – and uses a derogatory term – "this fellow" – with some disdain – "was also with Jesus of Nazareth." And there he is, exposed again. He just can't get away. Matthew tells us it was another one, a different maid. Mark and Luke just refer to "the maid," they don't tell us what

maid it was. Matthew tells us it was another one, another servant girl. Luke, by the way, in Luke 22:58, adds that at this time a man also confronted him, the same as the girl did; and again I say it's a very natural scene. This is the time of his second denial. But that's not to say that there was only one statement made. It was another maid, but Luke also adds that there was a man there in the corridor also that confronted him. So here is the second denial scene. The girl and then the man, and they confront him, and the crowd must have been drawn into it, because it says she said, verse 71, "Unto them that were there" – she puts it out for the whole crowd again that he is one who followed Jesus. And he's confronted again.

His response is really unusual, absolutely amazing, verse 72: "Again he denied with an oath, 'I do not know the man.'" Poor Peter. He is angry. He is embarrassed. He is frustrated. He is afraid. He is confused. He is trapped. And now his denials are getting more vehement, and this time he doesn't just lie, he double lies. He lied, and then he lied, and he lied in that he said he didn't lie. He lied in his lie, and he lied in his oath. You know what an oath is? It's to swear to the truth, to swear – the ultimate oath would be to swear by the living God. Back in verse 63, when the high priest wanted the truth out of Jesus, he said, "I adjure Thee by the living God, tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." Peter made an oath. He made an oath, personal pledge of truthfulness before God, "I pledge the truth before God, I do not know the man – I do not know this man, Jesus." It's incredible.

John the apostle says that it is characteristic of a believer that he knows the Father. That he has an identification with the Father. Paul says we cry, "Abba, Father." We are the ones who know Christ and make Him known. Peter's going against the grain of his own nature, going against what he is, a child of God, violating a basic trait. He is vehemently denying, and bringing in an oath of truthfulness that he doesn't know Christ. It's the second denial. It's worse than the first. It demonstrates a lack of trust. Why couldn't he just say the truth, and commit himself to the care of the Lord? Because he didn't have the spiritual strength; he was weak. He had great spiritual privilege, and great spiritual experience, but one thing escaped him, and that was that in spite of your experience, and in spite of your privilege, you're not necessarily invincible. And it may be that there are people who think that because they know so much about the Bible, and because they've experienced so many things in terms of the moving of God, that they are beyond the possibility of a disaster, and that's just when you're most vulnerable. That's right where Peter was.

I mean if you think because you've been in Grace Church, you're invincible, you better guess again. This man was with Jesus Himself for three years, and look where he went. You see, sooner or later, you have to have the brokenness of humility, you have to realize that you can't defy the Word of the Lord, you have to get on your knees to seek the strength you admit you don't have, and you've got to start getting in line with the plan of God, or you're going to find yourself in the same tragedy as Peter did. Now, what occurred after this, the second one? Verse 73, "After a while" – each time, it says "after a while," once Luke says it, once Matthew says it. It gives you the impression that Peter's again trying to be a little coy about this, so he hangs around, and after a while, he sort of floats out into the

courtyard again. "And after a while came unto him they that stood by," a group of men were standing around. You say, "How long later was this?" Well, Luke 22:59 says it was an hour later. So he just sort of milled around for about an hour.

Now the two hours are up. The first hour, two denials, and then another hour goes by and here comes his third denial, about an hour later. He can't quite bring himself to getting out of the place. No doubt he was drifting over toward the big room in Caiaphas' wing where the trial was going on, because it must have been something incredible. I mean they were screaming about blasphemy over there. By this time they were spitting on the face of Jesus, and with their fists they were pounding on His face. And then they were slapping Him in the face, having blindfolded Him, and asking Him to tell them who it was that hit them when He couldn't see. It was a horrible thing. And Peter was there, and he was nearby, and he could see through the doorways and windows into the scene. And he just can't bring himself away. And maybe the screams of blasphemy, and the pounding and beating on Jesus, and spitting on Him held him there. And he even enters into some conversation, to the degree that these people come over and say, "Surely you are one of them, for your speech betrays you." You've got that Galilean accent, that Galilean brogue, which was readily distinguishable. And so these people, who have been listening to him speak and hearing his accent, say, "You're one of them – you're one of them."

By the way, it says here that a group "came over and said" – the spokesman for the group, according to John 18:26, was a relative of Malchus, whose ear Peter had cut off. So he is the spokesman, and I'm sure the rest chimed in, too, again in that very natural way that it would occur in a crowd. And Peter hits rock bottom; verse 74, "Then he began to curse and to swear, saying, 'I know not the man.'" Stop at that point. Unbelievable, isn't it? Can you see yourself doing this? Can I see myself doing this? Cursing, *katathematiz*, very, very strong word. What does it mean? Basically, it means to pronounce death upon yourself at the hand of God if you're lying. May God kill me and damn me if I'm not speaking the truth. Now, let me tell you something, folks: that is the most serious taking of the Lord's name in vain imaginable. May God destroy me if I don't speak the truth. Boy, Peter, you better be careful. And to swear, *omnu*, to pledge your truthfulness; so on the positive side he says, "I pledge my truthfulness, I pledge my truthfulness," on the negative side, he says, "May God damn me, may God kill me if I lie." And he calls down the damning power of God on his own head if he's not telling the truth.

That's how far gone he is. He's lost all fear of God, all sense of reality; first, a single lie, and then to cover up a single lie, a double lie, and then to cover up a double lie, a flurry of lies, with curses and swearing. And "he began," it says in verse 74, he began, which is to say it doesn't just happen once, he began it, and it must have had some continuity. And he kept it up. And maybe the accusations kept flying, and here is our dear, precious Lord, who has been rejected by the world, sold by one of His disciples, and now denied again and again with curses and swearing by the leader of His own group. Talk about a man of sorrows. And Peter has gone to the very pit. I mean you couldn't get any

lower than this.

And then verse 74 says, “And immediately the cock crowed.” That’s the second time. And as I’ve told you, cock crow was about 3:00 AM; the Lord’s prediction came to pass. The Lord’s prediction came to pass. Now, listen very carefully. Luke tells us in Luke 22:61 that at this very split second, when the cock crowed, these words, Luke 22:61, listen: “And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter.” What a look – unbelievable. Peter must have been able to see the Lord. Maybe he was standing outside the window, looking in at all that was going on, watching Jesus beaten and spit on. Maybe he was in the courtyard a ways away, and Jesus, the trial having ended, was led passed him, and in moving past, looked into the eyes of Peter. The look must have burned his soul. It must have created for him the most excruciating pain he had ever experienced, and even beyond that. Straight into Peter’s eyes went the gaze of the Lord Jesus, to show him you never do mistrust what I say. If I say it will happen, it will happen – and to burn indelibly in his heart the evil of his own sin; to make him know forever what he had done, and yet to look on him with compassion and mercy. Jesus, imagine it, His face covered with spit, battered and puffy and bleeding, looks into the eyes of Peter who has delivered blows of denial that are infinitely worse than any fist could ever deliver – an indescribable moment of pain.

The total collapse of Peter is immediately frozen like a still picture, and crystalized in start imagery in one moment of time, as the whole scene stops, and the eyes of Peter are frozen on the eyes of Jesus. And you ask yourself the question, “How in the world could Peter ever sink to that depth? I mean how could anybody ever do that? How can it happen?” Let me remind you, very briefly. Here are the footprints down the path. One, self-confidence, he felt he could handle anything. He could follow Christ anywhere. His own warm feeling and affection would be enough to make him able to handle any circumstance. It was self-confidence. He thought he could stand. And secondly, it was insubordination; the Lord told him twice, and he denied it both times. He defied the word of the Lord. He would not submit himself. He would not become subordinate to the word of God. He didn’t take the word of God seriously. He rejected reproof. He ignored the voice of the living God – just like a believer who reads it, and then goes out and ignores it. We’re not invincible. We cannot defy the Word of God and survive. And the third step was prayerlessness. He slept instead of praying. He slept instead of watching for temptation. Spiritual neglect; he omitted an essential spiritual duty, and that generated a downward impulse. Spiritual indifference leads to ruin, lack of prayer leads to disaster.

And then the next footprint in his path to disaster was independence. He acted on his own. He didn’t need to seek God’s will. He didn’t need to ask the Lord what to do. He acted on his own. Therefore he got himself into situations that were disastrous to him. And finally, the fifth step was compromise. He followed Jesus in, he goes right into the lion’s den, he sits by the fire, he mingles with the crowd that was the enemy of Christ. He reminds me of Psalm 1:1, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful,”

remember that? He walked in, he stood around and finally he what? Sat down, and he sat among the scornful. He took his place in a compromising way. Either he should have been where Christ was, not far off, or he should have been gone from the temptation that he knew he wasn't able to handle. But to sit in the midst of the temptation, and yet far enough from Christ not to be able to count on that resource, was to be in the place of compromise.

Spiritual self-confidence, thinking you're invulnerable, insubordination, prayerlessness, independence leads to compromise. If you think you can handle every situation, you're going to get into some situations, believe me, you can't handle. And that's where he was. And that led to defeat. The darkest hour in human history, this was the hour of the power of darkness, hell was running at full tilt, the forces of demons and the enemy were going at all their power, and Peter was no match for this in the flesh – no match. And we shudder. And frankly we wouldn't be too shocked if he just went out and hanged himself like Judas, but he didn't. And may I say something to you that's the key to this whole message? The true Peter is seen not in his denial, but in his repentance. Did you get that? The true Peter is seen not in his denial, but in his repentance. We don't ask the question whether Judas was a real believer, because we know how the story ended. He went out and hanged himself. There was no real repentance.

Peter went out and wept bitterly and came back to be restored, and therein lies the difference between a Judas and a Peter. Both will sin, but one will be repentant and restored, and the other will be damned. And you know what the difference is? Remember Luke 22:32, Jesus said, "Peter, Satan desires to have you, but I have prayed for you, that your faith fail not." Remember that? You know why Peter's faith didn't totally fail? Because the Lord had what? Prayed for him. Listen, the reason that we stay saved is not because of something we've done, but because the Lord holds us. He didn't hold Judas because He never had Judas, but He held Peter, and Peter's faith didn't fail. And the story isn't over. We come to the sinner's remorse in verse 75. "Peter remembered the words of Jesus." First thing he did was remember. He remembered the words of Jesus. He remembered that He said it would be this way, that he would do it three times before that cock crowed twice. He remembered. And then it says, "He went out." That's the second thing, he hit the exit. And I'm glad that none of the gospel writers tell us where he went or what he said; that's a private moment of repentance. That's a private moment of coming to grips with your own sin. We don't need to be there. That's for him and the Lord, whom he so grossly offended.

But we do know that the third thing, it says, is he not only remembered and went out, but "He wept bitterly." And it uses a very strong expression, *eklausen pikrs*, which means to weep audibly, to sob loudly; he just wrenched in the agony of repentance. And you know something? You learn a great lesson here. It wasn't until he saw the face of Jesus, and it wasn't until he remembered the words of Jesus, that he repented. His sin didn't make him repent. It was the Savior that made him repent. And here's a very important principle; listen to it. It is not our sins that make us weep. It is not our sins that make us repent. It is when we see what kind of Savior we have sinned against. And so we ever and

always need the vision of who He is. The sin alone didn't do anything to Peter. He would have kept it up. But it was when he saw Jesus, and he remembered His words; it is the repentance born of a recognition of the kind of Savior we have sinned against. That is why, beloved, the ministry here, and the ministry that I'm committed to, is not a ministry of just telling you to turn from your sin, but a ministry of lifting up our God of glory, of lifting up the Lord Jesus Christ, so that in seeing Him, you understand the heinousness of sin.

And in the wrenching agony of repentance, things were made right with the Lord he had sinned against. He, like Isaiah, cried out to God, "I am a man of unclean lips," and he, like Isaiah, was purged. And the end of the story is the sinner's restoration. And if we had time, we could go to John 21, and in John 21, Peter's in Galilee, and the Lord appears after the resurrection. And He comes to restore Peter, and He comes to Peter and says, "Simon, son of Jonah" – what – "do you love Me?" And He says it to him how many times? Three. And three times Peter says, "I love You, I love You, I love You." Why do you think the Lord gave him three opportunities to say that? Pretty obvious, isn't it? The Lord was bringing him back. For the three times of denial, there were three times of affirming love. And the Lord accepted Peter's testimony, and the Lord restored Peter, and He said, "Feed My sheep, feed My lambs, feed My sheep," and He put him back on his feet, and back in the ministry, and he became the great proclaimer of the gospel in the early church.

And I'm telling you, folks, that's a hopeful story, isn't it? God is in the business of giving grace to sinners. God is in the business of restoring the fallen. God is in the business of picking up the person who has even denied Him, who has shown himself to be weak, and putting him in a place of strength. I'm glad we have a God of forgiveness, aren't you? I went back and read 1 and 2 Peter this week, because I wanted to see if Peter talked about self-confidence, and he does, and says you ought to turn yours in for humility. And I wanted to find out if he talked about insubordination, and he does, and calls people to obey the Word. And I wanted to find out if he talked about prayerlessness, and he does, and he says watch and pray. And I know where he got that. And I wanted to find out if he had anything to say about compromise, and he does. He calls for faithfulness to death, and an answer to every man who asks you of the faith that is in you, with meekness and fear. He learned all his lessons right here.

And I suppose we could sum up his own testimony of this occasion in his own words. "Ye therefore, beloved," 2 Peter 3:17, "seeing that you know these things before, beware lest you also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness." Peter says, "Beloved, don't you do what I did, but grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." It's a good word from Peter, isn't it? He ought to know. He was there. Thank You, Father, for our time this morning. Thank You for the message here that You restore sinning saints. For any in this fellowship who have fallen from their steadfastness, fallen into proud, disobedient, prayerless independence, compromise, and are reaping the results, who have denied You, if not with their lips, in the way they live, and the choices they make, and the use of their resources and time, in their thoughts, I pray that

they may see the eyes of Jesus looking at them, that they may remember the words of Jesus, that they may hear the cock crow, that they may go and weep bitterly, and be restored. We want to be all God wants us to be. I trust that's your desire as well. The Lord doesn't need any more people who do to Him what Peter did, who depend on their own flesh. Let's stand in the strength of the Spirit, committed to obey the Word, to prayer, submission to God's will, no compromise, to know victory instead of defeat.

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