

March 15, 2015

## THE DENIAL

Matthew 26:69-75

Peter's heart was sinking as he watched the Elders of the Sanhedrin slapping Jesus, spitting on Him, mocking Him. This was his Lord! Peter believed Jesus was "*the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*" He said so before all the disciples at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked, "*Who do you say that I am?*" (Matthew 16:15-16) No legions of angels were coming to the rescue. All the other disciples had deserted Jesus. Racing through his mind is all the ways he should come to Jesus' defense and rescue, ...but he's full of fear, and he's only one man. There are guards standing so close by, watching what's happening as well. Could Peter summon the angels? He wishes he could. He feels so helpless. It hurts to see Jesus treated so poorly. And it should cut into us too that Jesus was treated this way. And yet this is only the beginning. They had said that Jesus "*deserved death.*" (v. 66)

To add insult to injury, Peter is no longer able to go unnoticed. At least one person was aware of him. "*A servant girl came to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus the Galilean.'*" (69) What was on her mind? Was she trying to get Peter in trouble? Was she appealing for him to do something? Was she sympathetic to Jesus and to His followers? Did she want Peter to know that she felt his pain? Or, was she just being antagonistic? "*He denied it before all of them...*" Apparently, "*all of them*" were observing Peter now. Peter couldn't hide. Maybe he was afraid of "*all of them,*" not just the guards. He looked around, his eyes darting. Everyone was looking at him. "*He denied it before all of them,*" not just the servant girl, "*'I do not know what you are talking about!'*" (70)

He was trying to tell her not to bother him. But "*all of them*" must have wondered about him. Why was he there? What was he waiting for? Who was he? The servants in the house of Caiaphas probably knew who the servants of the Elders were. They could recognize who the guards were. If there were others who were curious about a trial that was happening after midnight, who came into the courtyard just to watch, they would probably have been some of the Jerusalem night people, and they could probably be easily distinguished in some way. But here was one man, unconnected to any of them, who was sober, not a servant, not a guard, not a political observer; a Jew, a tradesman by his clothes, not wealthy, but watching. Who was he?

Peter moved away from the crowd. "*He went out to the porch.*" (71a) Could he still see Jesus. He couldn't bear to watch what they were doing to Him. And Jesus just took it! Peter's heart was sinking lower and lower. He had just lied...to save himself? ...to claim no responsibility? He was finally completely deserting Jesus.

But... "*another servant girl saw him, and said to those standing by, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth!'*" (71b) Exposed! Hoping to avoid their scrutiny, Peter may have wished they would just begin to think that maybe he only *looked like* someone who had been with Jesus. Well, yeah! He is someone who had been with Jesus. "*Again he denied it ...with an oath...*" (72a) Implied, though not put on the lips of Peter by Matthew, is the words "I swear..." "*I do not know the man!*" (72b)

Obviously. The only people who could possibly deny Jesus are those who don't really know Him. But Peter had made his beautiful profession of faith, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*" Had he just been saying what he thought was the right thing to say, but didn't really believe it? Many do that. It happens when people make vows. It happens when people are being interviewed for jobs. It

happens when people run for political office. But when Peter said that Jesus was *"the Christ, the Son of the Living God,"* Jesus responded by telling all the disciples, *"Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father in heaven. And I tell you, (speaking directly to Peter), you are Peter (petros), and on this rock (petra), (the rock of Peter's words) I will build My Church!"* (Matthew 16:17-18) As long as the Spirit of Christ, the Son of the Living God, is vital in a Church, nothing can prevail against it. The Church is the Body of Christ as long as Christ is the head; as long as Jesus is professed as the Christ, the Son of the Living God! And the worst of the worst... *"the gates of Hades, shall not prevail against it."* (16:18)

But that's where Peter is feeling himself to be. Several of those who had been standing by were now watching Peter's first trial! He would have other trials, and he would endure much for the sake of the faith, but for now, Peter is on trial. They *"came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them...'"* (73a) "One of them!" Have you ever been categorized as "one of them?" It sets you apart from "the rest of us."

*"Your accent betrays you!"* (73b) you could recognize someone from Galilee as easily as you might recognize someone from Chicaaago. And if this man in the courtyard was from Galilee, they presumed he must have some affiliation with Jesus, the Man from Galilee. The teacher who had disciples, followers; who had healed, confronted the Chief Priests and the Elders; who had ridden into Jerusalem only days before as the people regaled Him with *Hosannas* and proclaimed Him to be *"blessed," "the One who comes in the Name of the Lord!"* (Matthew 21:9)

Had Peter forgotten it all? Was he feeling disillusioned? Disappointed? Discouraged? Why didn't Jesus call on the angelic legions to come to His aid? Every question racing through his mind was like a hammer blow against Satan's chisel poised upon the rock solidness of Peter's faith. Peter was turning into sand, and at that moment he was just falling apart. *"He began to curse,"* ...he swore and oath, *"I do not know the man!"* (74a)

THE COCK CROWED!!! Even before Peter finished his sentence, *"At that moment the cock crowed!"* (v. 74b) Immediately, Peter was flooded with such an immense awareness that grief welled up inside him. He couldn't hold back the tears. He *"remembered what Jesus had said,"* back in verse 34, *"Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times!"* (75) At this moment of Peter's deepest darkness, a sharp light pierced through right to his heart. Jesus *knew!* How could He have known unless the Spirit of the Living God was in Him? There was no question, Jesus is the Christ. What was happening to Him was fulfilling the Scriptures. *"Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth!"* (Isaiah 53:7)

Realization had cut through Peter's fear, and as he became more and more aware of Jesus as the Messiah in that moment, he came face to face with the fact that he had just denied Him three times. He couldn't escape the truth. He couldn't escape his failure. But he could escape the courtyard. *"And he went out and wept bitterly."* (75)

Peter couldn't help but condemn himself. His Master was being condemned to death, slapped, punched, spit on. Things would get worse for Jesus...much worse. Peter walked away... lost, empty, deeply disappointed in himself. His heart was broken. But... a broken and contrite heart, God will not despise! (Psalm 51:17)

Denial is a bitter thing. Very bitter. Reversing it is hard. But that's exactly what Peter would do. He would join the others. They had deserted Jesus, but none of them had done so as seriously as he had just done. Peter was going to find a way to overcome his failure, if at least he could encourage the

others. Because he knew Jesus was the Christ, he knew that this wasn't over yet. Peter may not have known, yet, how it would continue. But he would overcome. And he would help the others overcome as well...accept for one of them.

That's for next time.

For now, just realize that there is a way to overcome the failures we suffer. There is always a way. Judas couldn't imagine it. Peter could.