

BEFORE THE ROOSTER CROWS

John 13:36-38

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Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times" (Jn. 13:38).

Those who teach the Bible find that many people are more interested in matters of curiosity or controversy than in the straightforward message of God's Word. An example is provided by Simon Peter during Jesus' farewell discourse. Jesus had told the disciples that he would soon leave them. Because of this, he urged, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another" (Jn. 13:34). That is the kind of biblical teaching that is not hard to understand, but is seldom valued. Thus Peter distracted Jesus and returned to the mysterious issue of his departure: "Lord, where are you going?" (Jn. 13:36). Gordon Keddie points out how Peter is like so many of us: "Speculation about prophetic predictions seems much more exciting than just living a quiet upright life, ordinary day after ordinary day."¹

Peter's interruption occurred at the moment when Jesus was seeking to inform the disciples about what he would provide for them after his departure into glory. But Peter was not ready to accept these words. "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" (Jn. 13:37), he blurted out. Yet Peter needed to understand where Jesus was going and what Jesus was doing for him, which were far more important than what Peter would do for Jesus.

¹ Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*, 2 vols. (location: Evangelical Press,), 2:53.

Christians are indeed to follow Christ, yet there are things that only Jesus can do, such as dying on the cross for our sins. Moreover, Jesus is able to do his works without needing our help. In contrast, the demands placed on any of us simply in following Christ are more than we can achieve in our own strength. It was to make this point clear to Peter that Jesus replied with a statement that was simultaneously a prophecy, a rebuke, and a ministry. “Jesus answered, ‘Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times’” (Jn. 13:38).

JUDAS AND PETER

The apostle John undoubtedly intended for us to reflect on Judas and Peter together as he reported the events of Jesus’ last night with his disciples. In doing this, it may be surprising to realize how much the two men had in common. Judas and Peter had both spent three years in Jesus’ company, seeing his miracles and receiving privileged instruction. They both had received Christ’s love and both had served him in return. Both men would fail Jesus in appalling ways in the hour of his greatest trial. We are told that Jesus “was troubled in his spirit” (Jn. 13:21) over Judas’ betrayal; Peter’s denials must surely have pained him even more.

The similar behavior of Judas and Peter shows us that anyone can fall to temptation, even when it comes to denying Christ. If Peter, who heads the list of Christ’s disciples, could fall and deny Jesus, then any of us can. The lesson of Peter’s failure was thus intended not merely for him but for all of Christ’s disciples.

If Peter had much in common with Judas, the differences between the two men are even more important. Most significantly, one of the them was saved and the other was not. Even though both of these men betrayed Jesus on the night of his arrest, Peter was ultimately restored by Jesus whereas Judas received nothing but the Lord’s prophetic woe (Lk. 22:22). When Judas faced the enormity of his heinous sin, he responded not with repentance but with suicide; Peter, instead, mourned, repented, and was restored.

The difference between Judas and Peter is best seen in the motives behind their actions. Judas sinned with a treacherous heart, using

piety as a cloak for his intended evil. Peter sinned with a boastful heart that was led into folly by his real love for the Lord. What a difference there is between a true disciple who lacks the strength to live up to his or her faith, and a false disciple who has no faith. Ultimately, the faithless betrayer, having no saving relationship with Jesus, must face the bitter consequences of sin by himself, as Judas did in taking his own life and then entering unforgiven into hell. In contrast, Peter, who belonged to the Lord Jesus, had a Savior to uphold him even in his sin and then to rescue him when he had fallen. So just as Peter shows that any of us can fall, he also appeals to each of us to the necessity of our having Jesus as our Savior.

PETER'S "SUDDEN" FALL

Having learned from Peter that any of us can fall, we should next consider the steps that led to his fall. As often happens, his betrayal of Jesus happened suddenly. Yet, as usually is the case, his "sudden" fall was the result of what had long been brewing in his heart.

This scenario is what we frequently find when believers fall into gross sin. For instance, King David looked out his palace window and gazed upon the beautiful figure of lovely Bathsheba. The latter half of David's reign was greatly marred by the sin that followed, yet it happened so quickly. In three terse verses we simply read that "he saw... he sent... and he took" (2 Sam. 11:2-4). How sudden a fall! Yet, in reality, the corruptions of pride and lust had crept unchallenged into David's heart long beforehand, awaiting the opportunity to strike. Peter's denial of Jesus warns us of the same. No wonder the wise man of Proverbs exhorts us: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23).

In studying John's Gospel, we have come to expect folly and sin from Peter, the lovable fisherman. But one sin we might not have expected was that of denying his Lord. What could have caused this true-hearted man to fail Jesus so badly? The first answer was Peter's *ignorance*, which resulted in part from his tendency of speaking when he should have been listening to Jesus.

Consider what Peter said to Jesus, here in the very shadow of the cross: “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you” (Jn. 13:37). This statement reveals an astonishing ignorance of what lay before our Lord, despite repeated explanations. How often Jesus had spoken of the necessity of his death! Earlier that very week, Jesus spoke of being “lifted up from the earth” (Jn. 12:32), thus telling them “by what kind of death he was going to die” (Jn. 12:33). This was added to numerous occasions when Jesus had plainly informed his disciples of what must soon happen: “The Son of Man... will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise” (Lk. 18:31-33). That very evening, Jesus had instituted the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, during which he passed them the cup and said, “This cup... is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk. 22:20). If it discourages us to see how little of Jesus’ teaching his disciples were able to understand and absorb, then we should realize how difficult it is for men and women to believe truths that contradict their preconceived notions. Seeing Jesus’ frustration with his students should drive every preacher and Bible teacher to his knees for prayer!

Given all that he had taught about his coming death, we can imagine some irony in Jesus’ voice when he replied to Peter, “Will you lay down your life for me?” (Jn. 13:38). It was not Peter who would lay down his life for Jesus, but Jesus who would lay down his life for Peter. Even when it came to the obligation of all disciples to follow Jesus and carry their cross, Peter betrayed a cavalier ignorance of the true cost of being a Christian. Therefore, writes Leon Morris, “When the crunch came he was not ready to die; he ran away with the others and went further by denying his Lord.”²

Peter was not only ignorant of what Jesus was about to do, but he also revealed an astonishing ignorance of himself. How little he calculated the truth of his weakness when faced with a real challenge! How little he recognized the infirmity of his corrupted nature! A. W. Pink comments, “Peter knew and really loved the Lord, but how little he as yet knew himself!”³ When Jesus told him, “Where I am going

² Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 487.

³ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 749.

you cannot follow me now” (Jn. 13:36), Peter should have recognized how ill equipped he was not merely for what Jesus was called to do but also for the far lesser deeds that Peter was himself called to do.

This ignorance of our spiritual weakness is not restricted to Peter. Christians think they can toy and dabble with forbidden pleasures, and then are dismayed when they have been overwhelmed in moral catastrophe. Peter’s duty that evening was simply to admit before the world that he was a follower of Christ: how far beyond our cowardly flesh even that is for the best of us! J. C. Ryle thus writes:

We never know how far we might fall if we were tempted. We fancy sometimes, like Peter, that there are some things we could not possibly do. We look pitifully upon others who fall into certain sins, and please ourselves in the thought that at any rate *we* should not have done so! We know nothing at all. The seeds of every sin are latent in our hearts, even when renewed, and they only need occasion, or carelessness, or the withdrawal of God’s grace for a season, to put forth an abundant crop.⁴

The way for biblically informed Christians to avoid falling into devastating sins is to realize how able we are to do such things. Being properly informed about ourselves, we will then shun temptation, starve our sinful desires, and daily pray as Jesus taught us, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Mt. 6:13).

A second contributor to Peter’s “sudden” fall was his *overconfidence*. This was, in part, a result of his ignorance, but it was also simply an aspect of his own sin and folly. Luke’s Gospel tells us that this episode took place right after the disciples had been disputing over which of them was the greatest (Lk. 22:24). Mark tells us that Peter not only claimed that he would die for Jesus, but also emphasized how much more faithful he would be than the others: “Even though they all fall away, I will not,” he boasted (Mk. 14:29). Peter thus set himself up as an example of the famous proverb: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18).

Jesus’ rebuke thus had the intention of humbling Peter. His pride was a threat not only for the dark night to come, but even more importantly for his future ministry as an apostle. Peter thought that the Lord needed him. What he had yet really to learn was how much

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 3:47-48.

he needed the Lord. A humbling failure would best teach this vital lesson. Therefore, Jesus told him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times” (Jn. 13:38).

In saying this, Jesus displayed his sovereign foreknowledge of detailed events, including the number of Peter’s denials and the immediate crowing of the rooster, so that this accurate prophecy is yet another proof of his deity. But Jesus also showed his wise handling of his servants. Jesus knew what Satan would think of Peter’s pompous self-confidence. Luke tells us that he said, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat” (Lk. 22:31). Peter’s abject weakness would be displayed in that Satan would overcome the fisherman not at his weakest point but at his strongest: the matter of Peter’s courage. It was imperative, then, for Peter to learn, as it is for us, that we are far too weak to withstand the sifting of Satan even in our greatest strength. The sooner we know this, the sooner we will become strong in the Lord, so that he will uphold us even at the points of our greatest weakness. This is what Paul meant when he said, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Peter’s “sudden” fall into sin had a third component that builds upon the previous two. Peter was ignorant of the Lord’s saving work and of his own weakness. He was thus overconfident in relying on his own strength. The third cause of his fall was his *neglect of spiritual resources*. This mistake occurred later on in this same evening, when Jesus took Peter and the others to the Garden of Gethsemane for prayer. Before drawing away for his own period of the most intense pleading with the Father, Jesus advised the disciples three times: “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Lk. 22:40). Yet when the Lord returned from his own prayers he found Peter and the others not praying but sleeping.

Peter’s was the sleep of a falsely confident man, who little considers his need of God’s help. How true this is today of parents who pray little for the Lord’s help with their children, of pastors who pray little for God’s power to build and protect their congregations, and indeed of all Christians who pray little, spend little time in God’s Word, and fail to be consistent in attending the worship of the church. Such a

neglect of spiritual resources reveals an ignorance and overconfidence when it comes to the grave matter of temptation to sin. John Calvin exhorts us from Peter's example: "Let us learn to distrust our own strength and betake ourselves early to the Lord, that He may support us by His power."⁵

FALLEN, BUT NOT FORSAKEN

Just as we need to be warned by the fall of Peter, we should also be heartened by the fact that while Peter would fall he would not be forsaken. Peter shows us that anyone can fall into temptation and even deny the Lord. But Peter also proves that when a true believer falters, Jesus will nonetheless save him or her in the end.

We can know that Peter was not forsaken by reading ahead in the story to when Jesus, after his resurrection, restores Peter to faith and apostleship (Jn. 21:15-19). But we need not even look ahead, for it was clear even here, as Jesus predicted Peter's denials, that the fisherman would not finally be lost. The reasons Peter was not lost pertain to every believer in Christ, so that while we must be vigilant lest we should fall, we can yet have the peace of knowing we will never be forsaken in Christ.

We know that Peter will not ultimately be lost, first, because of *the declaration* that Jesus made concerning his salvation. Jesus said, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward" (Jn. 13:36). At the time, Peter may have only heard the first half of that statement – "You cannot follow me now" – but it is the second half that contained his salvation – "you will follow afterward."

There are two ways we can read this declaration, both of which are probably intended. First, since Jesus was going ahead of his disciples into glory, he declared that Peter would follow there himself. This is the theme that Jesus goes on to in the next verses, seeking to give assurance to all the disciples: "Let not your hearts be troubled... In my Father's house are many rooms... And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I

⁵ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 4:72.

am you may be also” (Jn. 14:1-3). In answer to Peter’s question, Jesus flatly declared this of him personally: Peter would follow Jesus into heaven.

Jesus was headed not only to heaven: he first would pass through his death on the cross. This is why Peter was being so presumptuous when he asked to follow the Lord and then glibly offered to die for him. Yet the time would come for Peter to follow his Master to the cross in order to die. After Christ’s resurrection and his restoration to service, Peter would follow Jesus in so many ways. Peter would declare Jesus’ gospel to Jerusalem and perform miracles in Jesus name. Peter would go on to share in the fellowship of the sufferings of the Lord and, according to the witness of church tradition, he died on a cross during Nero’s persecution in Rome. At the end of John’s Gospel are words from Jesus that allude to Peter’s future crucifixion (Jn. 21: 18-19). But “now” was not the time for Peter to face that test. Indeed, an important step in Peter’s apostolic preparation was his failure on this night, which would teach him so many things about himself and the grace of the Lord.

Just as Jesus made a declaration concerning Peter’s salvation, he has done the same for everyone who believes in him. Many of these statements are found in the Gospel of John. Jesus said: “This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life” (Jn. 6:39-40). Similarly, after declaring himself the good shepherd, Jesus stated that his sheep will know him and follow his voice. He added, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (Jn. 10:28).

Whenever the fall of Judas and Peter is preached, many Christians will worry over their souls. Just as the disciples worried when Jesus said that one would betray him, each of them asking, “Is it I?” (Mk. 14:19), Christians today worry, “Will I betray Jesus and be lost?” The way to answer the question is to determine if you are a Judas or a Peter now. The key difference is that Judas never believed in Jesus – and never professed to, so far as we know – whereas Peter was a believer in Christ for all his other failings. Despite all your failings, if

you are a believer in Christ, he has declared your salvation no less than he declared that Peter would follow him into heaven.

Second, Luke's Gospel adds an important detail that it will be helpful to include here: Jesus *prayer* for Peter's repentance and restoration. "Simon, Simon, behold," he said, "Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail" (Lk. 22:31-32). Satan may be able to overcome Peter's courage but he could not defeat Jesus' prayer.

We, too, as believers in Christ, are shielded by his priestly intercession, as Jesus prays for us in heaven from his throne at the right hand of God. While Peter, in his foolish self-confidence, would fail to pray on this dreadful night, Jesus would remember to pray not only for himself but also for his sifted disciple. Paul applies this to us: "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Rom. 8:34). Jesus' ministry for every believer continues even now, safeguarding in heavenly prayer those whom he purchased on earth with his own blood.

Third, Jesus' warning to Peter included a *provision* that was intended to provoke his repentance: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times" (Jn. 13:38). Later that night, when Peter had denied Jesus for the third time, "immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed" (Lk. 22:60). At that moment, Jesus turned and looked at his disciple. "And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly" (Acts 22:61-62).

I do not how you or I or any Christian may fail our Lord, even doing something so dreadful as to deny him before the world. But I know that if we do, and if we have sincerely believed in Jesus despite our failure, Jesus has already made provision for our repentance and restoration, just as he did for Simon Peter.

What a hope this gives to parents, spouses, and friends of those who once sincerely professed faith in Jesus and gave credible evidence of that faith, but since have fallen away. None of us is able to read anyone's heart but our own, and just as the disciples were fooled by

Judas we may easily have been fooled by others' false profession of faith. But we know that those who truly belong to Christ will never be lost and that he has made provision for the repentance of his most wayward sheep.

WITNESSES OF THE SAVIOR

Remember that Peter fell in part because he confused roles with Jesus: Peter was never meant to be a Savior but only a witness to the Savior Jesus Christ. Overly confident in himself, Peter then did not rely on the Lord, nor avail himself of the privilege of prayer. His experience proves to us that we are never the Savior but always those who are saved. Knowing that Jesus will be faithful to us no matter how waywardly we may stray or how grievously we may fall, our privilege is to do the very thing that Peter failed to do. We are to be witnesses for Jesus in the world. It is our privilege to be asked what Peter was asked: "You are one of his disciples, are you not?" and to answer, "Yes, I am," and then to tell all who will hear about the grace and glory of Jesus Christ.

If we overcome our ignorance with the teaching of God's Word, if we humble ourselves in constant reliance on the Lord's grace, and if we make diligent use of prayer and other spiritual resources, we can be confident even in our weakness that we will not deny our Lord. In this way, before not merely the rooster crows but before the trumpet sounds to summon all mankind to appear at the return of Christ in his glory, we may be used to tell many of Jesus and his salvation.