

Fifth Passion Sermon

Peter Thrice Denies The Lord Jesus In The House Of Caiaphas.

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Matt. 26, 69-75.

Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him, saying, Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee. But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest. And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth. And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man. And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech betrayeth thee. Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crew, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.

This is a useful narrative, for which reason it is related by each of the four Evangelists.¹ It is useful chiefly in two respects. First, it teaches us to cherish humility and avoid presumption; for see how easily Peter, who would previously have gladly imperiled his body and his life for the Lord Jesus,² is brought to such a terrible fall. And secondly, it teaches us how we may regain grace, after we have fallen into sin; for Peter furnishes us with a pleasing example of Christian repentance,³ showing what repentance really is, and how we must be freed from sin. But let us first relate the history.

When Jesus was taken captive in the garden and led away, first to Annas, father-in-law to Caiaphas, and from Annas to the high priest Caiaphas, John, as he himself writes, followed from afar and entered the house of Caiaphas, in

which he was acquainted, bringing Peter in with him. The latter sat down with the servants in the house and warmed himself at the fire. Then a damsel asked him whether he was a disciple of the captive Jesus. He vehemently denied that he was. The cock then crew for the first time. Upon this, as Matthew and Mark relate, Peter went away from the fire, out into the porch, where he was encountered in a similar way by a maid, who began to say to them that stood by, 'This is one of them.' Luke tells us that it was a man who said this of Peter. It needs merely be remembered here that, after the maid had begun to speak about Peter, the rest also expressed their opinions and chimed in with the maid. Peter then a second time denied. And finally, about the space of one hour after, as we are informed by Luke, he was met by one of the servants of the high priest, who, according to John, was a kinsman to him whose ear Peter cut off. He attacks Peter a little more severely than the rest, publicly saying that he had seen him in the garden with Jesus. Peter would not keep silent to this accusation, for he feared that it would endanger his life. Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man, of whom ye speak. Now the Lord turns and casts

- 1 Editor's Note: The four passages are Matthew 26:59-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18 (First Denial) and John 18:25-27 (Second and Third Denials).
- 2 Editor's Note: Peter's affirms that he would never fall away from Jesus: Matthew 26:31-35; Mark 14:27-31; Luke 22:31-38; John 13:31-38.
- 3 Editor's Note: The passages in footnote 1 recount how Peter "wept bitterly" after his denial of Christ. Later, Jesus reinstates Peter in John 21:15-25.

upon Peter a look which so penetrates his soul, that he now perceives what he has done; and he goes out of Caiaphas' palace and weeps bitterly. This is about the whole of the occurrence in order, as related by the four Evangelists.

Here we should, in the first place, as stated in the beginning, learn from the example of pious Peter to recognize our weakness, so that we may refrain from putting absolute confidence in other people or in ourselves. For our hearts are so entirely faint and fickle that they change every hour, as the Lord says in the 2. chapter of John. Who in the world would have expected such instability and feebleness in Peter! When the Lord, Luke 22., cautioned him, saying, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat, how courageous was he not, how bold and undismayed! "Lord," said he, "I am ready to go with Thee, both into prison, and to death." And when the Lord continued to admonish him, telling him not to be so foolhardy, and that before the cock would crow twice he should have denied Him thrice, we see that Peter thought it all a fable. He imagined this impossible, and intended to adhere to and defend the Lord at the risk of his own life. And his actions, indeed, show this to have been his intention. For in the hour of greatest peril, when the Jews were taking captive the Lord in the garden, Peter was the first to draw his sword, and he slashed into the mob, notwithstanding that he and only one other armed person opposed so many who were well equipped. Now who would have believed that one so valiant, who so faithfully stands by his Master, would so soon afterwards shamefully betray Him? In the garden no one attempted to hurt Peter and his fellow disciples, for the Lord's "Let these go" protected them. And especially here in the house of Caiaphas no one desires to injure them. But when, altogether incidentally, and perhaps through sympathy, the damsel that kept the door said unto Peter: "Art not thou also one of this man's disciples?" his courage failed him, and he feared that he would have to share his Master's fate if he should answer yes, and, therefore, he denies that he is a disciple. And when he was accosted on this point the second time and the third, he began to curse and to swear, calling upon God to visit upon him His wrath if he had ever known or seen the man.

Let us pay due attention to the conduct of Peter, so that we may learn properly to know ourselves and other people, and to beware of presumptuousness. For if such a denial of faith can

proceed from Peter, who, above all the other disciples, had a heart filled with loyalty and love for the Lord Jesus, yea, who was so enlightened by the grace of God that even Christ said unto him: "Blessed art thou, Simon, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven," and that He gave to him the name Cephas, "a stone," how much more easily can not such denial come from us poor mortals, who are much inferior to Peter in point of gifts, and, in all other respects, much more faint and frail? Be on thy guard, therefore; be not irreverently bold; think not that thou hast climbed the mountain and art out of danger; remember that thy flesh is totally corrupt! Neither doth Satan slumber, but walketh about as a roaring lion, seeking whose heart he may trouble, and whom he may cast down or even devour. Therefore, be vigilant; live in the fear of God; build upon His grace alone, and in Him repose thy trust and confidence! And let that which Jesus spake in the garden to Peter, James and John, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation," be spoken also unto thee, that thou mayest neither snore nor be falsely secure, as though there were no danger and no need for fear from henceforth, but that thou mayest watch and be sober, not doubting that thy arch-enemy is close at hand, yea, that thou bearest him in thy bosom! Thou wouldst, therefore, be lost, should God not stand by thee with His Holy Spirit. Thou canst neither govern nor restrain thyself one single hour. Therefore, say: I will pray God to give me His Holy Spirit, that He may rule and rightly lead me, and either ward off disturbance and temptation, or else graciously succor me and suffer me not to fall! This is the first point presented by our narrative. Under this head, however, appropriately comes the solemn admonition of the Lord, given in the 21. chapter of Luke: "Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness;" for we are just as ill-bred as the brute, which, when well fed, shows its insolence. He who has plenty and to spare, readily forgets God and His Word, or else cares very little for them; and then, before he knows it, he is entangled in the devil's net. Therefore, wouldst thou be out of danger, observe these three things: fear God, be watchful and sober, and pray without ceasing! For, al-

though we must still feel temptation's thrusts, and sometimes fall because of weakness, God, through His Holy Spirit, will lift us up again, and not suffer us to remain victims of temptation.

In the second place, we find consolation in this narrative. Here we clearly see the fruit of our Lord Jesus' sufferings; and Peter's conduct plainly pictures to us not only the grace and mercy of God, but also the way in which grace may be regained by us when lost in unrighteousness and sin. Terrible and heinous is the fall of Peter; as such he feels it most forcibly, and, therefore, he cannot longer bear to mingle with men, but steals away and weeps bitterly.

But here we find that the Lord not only foretold to him his fall, but afterwards also received him into favor without punishing him as his sin had deserved. For on Easter, before the Lord Jesus had shown Himself, the angel who was at the grave commanded the women to announce to His disciples, and to Peter especially, that the Lord had risen. And the Lord Himself, soon after He had appeared to Magdalene and the other women, appeared to Peter and comforted him. This all works together for our consolation, teaching us not to banish from our hearts confidence in God's grace, though we may have fallen, but, seeing how the Lord deals with Peter, to be assured that He has died on our account, and that His sufferings shall bring us consolation and assistance, although we are poor sinners. For if sinners are not to have the benefit of the sufferings of Christ, then would He have rejected His disciples, and particularly Peter, first of all, and nevermore have interested Himself for them, because they were all offended because of Him, fled from Him, and so shamefully denied Him. But the merciful Lord does not so; they are still His dear disciples, notwithstanding that they disgraced their calling. Let us mark this and apply it to our hearts for consolation; for thus will our gracious God also deal with us.

But, say you, what becomes of poor Judas? Do we not see him cut off from all grace? Although we shall come to speak of this hereafter, it is still necessary for us, in this connection, to know what it was that furthered and preserved

Peter, and what it was that subjected Judas to impediments and despair, so that Peter's case may teach us how to take care of ourselves and how to beware of that which befell Judas. Now we must make a distinction between Peter and Judas with reference to the heinousness of their crimes. For, while both transgress the will of God and subject themselves to everlasting condemnation, Judas' sin is greater than that of Peter. Judas surrenders to sin voluntarily and with premeditation, and, notwithstanding the Lord's frequent and fervent warnings, prefers his sins above Christ's love. This is not the case with Peter; his sin was accidental, not deliberate and malicious; his denial of Christ was the result of casual diffidence or weakness. Had he apprehended this result, he would not have entered the house of Caiaphas. Then, there is this further distinction between Peter and Judas, that the former, unlike the latter, is not the enemy of Christ and does not hate Him; that he does not run counter to the Lord, like the latter, with such wanton scorn, hatred and obstinacy that no exhortation to penitence and no favor of the Lord can influence him to repent; but that, before he considers and perceives what he is doing, through fear and weakness he is so overcome that he denies his dear Lord and begins to curse and to swear.

Let us mark well the aforementioned distinction in regard to sins, viz.: that, although both Peter and Judas do sin, and thus subject themselves to the judgment of God, the sin of Judas is more enormous than the sin of Peter. For the Lord subsequently makes the difference between Pilate and the Jews, saying, Jno. 19., "He that hath delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin." This is the reason why the conscience of Judas is more painfully wounded than Peter's, and his sufferings are more severe; the burden borne by Judas is by far the heavier and the more oppressive. Nevertheless, Peter's sin had deserved death, as well as that of Judas.

This distinction is justified also by St. Paul, who says of his persecuting Christ and His believers that he had done this in ignorance, and that, although his work of persecution was a damnable, mortal sin, it was still not at all to be compared with the persecutions carried on by the

chief priests and Pharisees. This difference deserves to be diligently regarded, so that we may beware of such wanton and malicious sins as of a most grievous burden, and therefore watch that we do not obstinately persevere in impenitence. Now, although sins may be classified according to the degree of their criminality, and although no doubt exists that the greater the sin, the greater the consequent torment of conscience; still, when a man has obtained knowledge of his sins and is terrified by the wrath of God, he must not judge the measure of forgiveness and grace by the enormity or number of his sins. All sins, even the least, are so great and serious that we are not able to estimate their heinousness; yea, so great that we could not endure one of them, were it adequately seen and felt by us. Besides, Satan can so magnify a sin, though it be not the greatest, that the timid, fearful soul which is guilty of it supposes that no one else on earth has ever committed so grievous a crime. Therefore, we must know and hold fast the Gospel doctrine of the grace and kindness of the Son of God; for this tells us that grace is mightier than all sin. It is the great object of God's Word and promises that no one may despair on account of sin but that all may trust in the grace of God through His only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus.

On this point Judas and Peter differ. Judas looks only at the enormity of his sins, falls into despair, thinks that all eternity can afford him neither counsel nor aid, and then the poor fellow goes and hangs himself. And why? Simply because he had despised God's Word and had not been bettered by it. When he now stood in need of consolation, but did not have the Word and desired not to turn to the Lord Jesus in faith, he was beyond all reach of help. Peter also wept bitterly, and feared and trembled on account of his sins, but he had more diligently heard and better remembered the Word of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, when he now finds himself in distress, he makes use of the Word, thinks of that which Christ has told him, clings to this, consoles himself with it, and hopes that God will be merciful to him. In such misery this is the true relief, which poor Judas lacked. But that this was really the course Peter took, and that he did abide by God's Word

and grace, the Lord testifies in the 22. chapter of Luke, saying: "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not." While he was denying Christ, we do not see that there was a spark of faith in his heart; but afterwards, when his conscience was aroused and he was tortured by it, his faith returned, preserving to him this Word of Christ, and preventing him from falling into despair.

Let us then learn here what true repentance is. Peter "wept bitterly." In this way repentance begins; the heart must truly perceive sin and be sincerely sorry for it, so that our delight in it, our love for it, and our living in it may cease. Our having disobeyed God's will and sinned, must be for us a source of heartfelt affliction.

Our might, however, cannot bring this about; but the Lord calls us to repent and makes His face to shine again upon us, just as He here calls and admonishes Peter by the crowing of the cock, of which He had told him before, and by turning and looking upon him. For we are by nature so disposed that we delight in sin and take pleasure in committing it continually. We see this in the case of Peter; for, after he had denied Christ once, he still keeps on until he has denied Him thrice, and cursed and sworn: "I do not know the man," being concerned about nothing. But when the cock crows and the Lord turns to look upon him, Peter immediately pauses and considers what he has done. Now, according to our nature and to the nature of sin, sin cannot help but terrify us, threaten us with God's wrath, and fill our hearts with anguish, as was the case with both Peter and Judas. Judas, when he perceived his sin, became so uneasy that he did not know what to do with himself. And Peter's agony was so great that it compelled him to flee from his fellow-men and give vent to his grief in tears, of which he could not shed enough.

When we feel such terror and anguish our best course is, first, to humble ourselves before God and freely confess our sins: O God, I am indeed a poor, miserable sinner, and, shouldst Thou depart from me with Thy grace, am able only to sin; and then, to abide God's Word and promises, adding: "But be merciful to me for the sake of Thy Son, Jesus Christ!" When the soul thus seeks

to console itself with God's Word, and sincerely trusts that God, for His Son's sake, will be merciful, then must the anguish abate and comfort surely follow. True and complete repentance, then, is this: to be terrified and humbled by sin, and to find comfort in the Lord Jesus and His sufferings through faith.

Thus, no doubt, Peter consoled himself with the word spoken to him by the Lord at the passover: "Satan hath desired to have you, but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not," Luke 22. For, although his heart was filled with anxiety and sorrow, he did not despair like Judas. True, at first this consolation was as small as a grain of mustard-seed. But since the ground, on which this little consolation rested, was God's own Word and promises, it increased wonderfully, and when Peter met Christ again, on holy Easter-day, it had grown so great that all terrors and all doubts had fled, and nothing remained except heart-felt humility, with which to confess his weakness and cheerfully to acknowledge himself a sinner. Sin was not able to leave aught in Peter's heart except this weakness and this confession. This consolation, like a mighty deluge, suffocated, yea, quenched the fire that had threatened to consume his heart. Since, therefore, we cannot live without temptation, we should prepare for it in time, and especially with diligence hear God's Word, and practice and remember it, so that consolation, like Peter's, may be ours in time of sorrow.

Thus we find that this example of St. Peter is given us for instruction and for consolation. We should learn from it, first, to flee false security and to live in the fear of God; for it is an easy matter even for great saints terribly to fall. But, secondly, we must also learn from this example to cling to God's Word, and to draw comfort from it, even when we have fallen, so that we may not, like Judas, despair on account of sin. For God does not wish any one to exalt himself on account of his endowments, for which reason we all should fear, watch and pray; neither does He, on the other hand, wish any one to be driven into despair by his sins. The Son of God became man and died upon the cross for the very purpose of banishing such evils. Therefore, if thou wouldst be a true Christian, fear God and confide in His

grace and Word, and thou shalt always find consolation, deliverance and help. May our dear Father in Heaven, through His Holy Spirit, grant

this to us all, for the sake of our blessed Lord and Saviour. Amen.