

From Hubris to Horror: Peter's Denial of Jesus

Matthew 26:30-35, 69-75

Mark Vroegop

30 And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 31 Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' 32 But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." 33 Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." 34 Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." 35 Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same (Matt 26:30-35).

69 Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." 70 But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." 71 And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." 72 And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." 73 After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." 74 Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. 75 And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly (Matt 26:69-75).

In the 2006 Winter Games in Torino, Italy, Lindsey Jacobellis – a 20 year old snowboarder – was going to be the clear winner of a gold medal in the women's snowboard cross. As she approached the final jump she had the finish-line in sight. While she was mid-air, Jacobellis added some flair to her jump by grabbing her snowboard and playing to the crowd. It could have been a memorable gold medal finish. But instead, Jacobellis overcompensated, lost her balance, and fell as she attempted to land her jump. Her failed show-boating allowed just enough room for the second-place snowboarder, Tanja Friden from Switzerland, to win the gold medal. Lindsey's coach fell onto the ground in disbelief; her overconfidence cost her the gold medal.¹

You can probably complete this sentence: Pride comes before a _____. That isn't just a pithy statement that your grandmother used to say; it is paraphrase from the book of Proverbs. And it probably wouldn't surprise you that the Bible is full of warnings about the danger of overconfidence:

¹ <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/02/18/sportsline/main1330015.shtml>

- Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall (Prov 16:18).
- Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor 10:12).
- For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked (Rev 3:17).

Overconfidence is disappointing and foolish; spiritual overconfidence can be disastrous. Probably the most obvious example of a spiritual-foot-in-the-mouth moment would be Peter's boastful claim in Matthew 26:33 – "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away" followed by his three denials of Jesus in 26:69-75 before the rooster crowed.

We are in our third message on the Passion of Jesus, and today we'll see both hubris and horror in just a few hours as Peter's overconfidence is dismantled. And from the painful, show-boating of Peter we'll learn a very important lesson: **Be careful about living by your assumptions and not by Christ's assurances.**

What You Can't See

Matthew moves his narrative from the Lord's Table event to yet another example of how Jesus and his disciples are on two very different pages. Peter is the main focal point, but he really is a representative for all of the disciples. And Matthew's main point in verses 30-32 is fact that all of them will "fall away" during his suffering. He is doing something more here than just predicting the future; he is telling his disciples things that they cannot see.

First, he tells them that they will all desert him. The word "fall away" (Greek: scandalidzo) can mean a number of things. It can mean 1) that a person doesn't come to faith (e.g., Matt 13:56), 2) to have a false or shallow faith revealed (e.g., Parable of Soils - Matt 13:21), 3) an act caused by another which causes a person to sin or reject the faith (e.g., Matt 18:6) or (in this case) 4) it can refer to a temporary denial or departure. In other words, some fall away and it is permanent; others fall away and it is only temporary.² The ultimate test is time. Why do I think that Jesus is talking about the fourth kind of falling away in the case of his disciples?

1. Peter and the other disciples do return to Christ after his resurrection. Their faith falters but it is not devastated.
2. Jesus, in John 16:1, says that his purpose in instructing them is to "keep them from falling."
3. According to Luke 22, Jesus specifically prayed for Peter's faith to would not fail.

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-33)

² H. Giesen, "σκανδαλιζω," Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990).

Jesus anticipates and predicts that under the pressure of the moment they will have a lapse in faith. They will depart and they will deny him. In a very personal way (notice “because of me”) Jesus will be left all alone. They will not be able to walk with him during this moment. They will abandon him. But, as we know, it will not be permanent. However, they do not see this act as possible.

Secondly, their temporary abandonment is part of the fulfillment of God’s suffering for the Shepherd. Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7 saying, “For it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” In other words while they are fully responsible for their rejection of him, it is all part of God’s plan. Once again you need to see divine sovereignty and human responsibility simply existing in a mutual tension.

Third, Jesus gives them hope by telling them that he will be raised from the dead and will go before them to Galilee. This is the same instruction that the women are given in Matt 28:7, and it came true in Matthew 28:16 when Jesus met with his disciples and gave them the Great Commission on a mountain in Galilee.

Let me summarize this for you. Jesus tells his disciples that they will desert him. Their actions will fulfill the Scriptures. But when it is all done, he will be raised from the dead and meet them again in Galilee. What an incredibly gracious thing to say! You are going to abandon me, but I’ll go before you into Galilee. You’ll all leave me, but I’ll go before you and we’ll meet again.

If you put all of this together, you get a clear picture that there is something happening here that the disciples cannot fully see. They do not have the necessary eyesight to put it all together. Satan wants to sift Peter; Jesus is praying for Peter; they will fail; God is working his plan; but Jesus will go before them. Even though Jesus tells them about the future, they do not get it. But here’s the problem: they think they do!

This is where spiritual overconfidence begins: assuming that you know the plan. We often express our arrogance by thinking that our knowledge, perception, or view is completely accurate. We can dangerously assume things that are not true or even real. Therefore, the first thing that we’ve got to see is that **we don’t see things as clearly as we think we do.** We don’t see the options, the plans, the potential outcomes, or the effects as we think. More importantly, we don’t see ourselves, our own hearts, our motives, or the behind-the-scenes plans of God like we often think we do. Too often the person who has said, “I can’t believe I did that” should have realized that the problem started with not believing what he or she **could** do.

The seeds of spiritual overconfidence are planted in the soil of spiritual naiveté, thinking that you see life more clearly than you really do.

What You Shouldn't Say

Next we hear Peter's heart. I am so grateful that we have this conversation and example in the Scriptures because I wonder if we would even talk about this or be warned about spiritual overconfidence without the painful example of the leader of the disciples.

Peter's brashness and overconfidence combine in a statement that is loaded with pride and comparison. "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away" (v 33). Now there are a lot of ways that Peter could have said this. He could have said, "Lord, I will never, desert you" but instead he immediately reveals the embedded comparison is in his heart. He is not only overconfident in himself; he is overconfident in his ability to be better than others. He assumes that the others could fail, but that he would not. He uses the other disciples as the backdrop by which he looks at himself. It is a very revealing statement. It is not just brash and arrogant; it is foolishly pretentious.

Jesus tries to correct him by making what should have been a shocking statement. "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times" (v 34). Peter should have been put back on his heels by Jesus's words because this was a very disturbing and loaded thing to say. Think of what Jesus just said:

- **"You will fail tonight."** Peter's words are so hollow that it will be merely a few hours before he verifies how empty words really are.
- **"You will fail before the rooster crows."** This was probably not only a time-stamp. The rooster will be sign for him to recall this conversation. But it was also likely something that called to mind Peter's actions. In other words, Jesus may have been comparing Peter to a strutting rooster that crows.
- **"You will deny me multiple times."** Three times is not just a small failure. Peter will not just fall away; he will deny Jesus not just once or twice but three times. It will be intentional and repeated.

Now at this point you would think that Peter would say something like, "What? Well, I'd better be careful then" or "Are you sure, Lord?" But spiritual overconfidence when challenged usually just goes into over-drive. That is what happens with Peter. He makes an even bolder statement: "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" (v 35). Don't miss the fact that he is saying that Jesus is dead wrong! His overconfidence causes him to believe himself even though it runs completely contrary to what Jesus says about him. Peter's drowns out the voice of Jesus with his own bombastic statements.

But the problem doesn't stop with Peter. It is strange how the overconfidence of one can infect an entire group. The other disciples will not be left behind, humbling accepting Jesus's words. They join in Peter's silly and shallow pep rally for self as they join him in saying the same thing.

Friends, this is a painful to watch, isn't it? But part of the pain of watching this in the text is realizing how often we've been just like Peter. There is a warning here about the possibility of being overly confident in our spiritual abilities or aptitude such that we convince ourselves of what we want to believe, and the effect is that we don't even hear what Jesus is saying.

This is an eternally important issue because Hell will be populated with people who cannot believe that they are there. The Bible tells us what we wouldn't understand on our own: that we are sinners and that we cannot self-atone. And if by comparison to others or by a biased evaluation of the good that we've done we attempt to justify ourselves, we not only argue with God; we verify the delusional self-centeredness that rules our hearts and makes us rebels against God. Spiritual overconfidence must be shattered when God conquers our hearts. Therefore, it is a sign of God's grace that he shows you who you really are. The caution here is to be sure that we look at what Jesus says about us in his Word and listen!

What You Could Do

Now let's see how the story turns out, and for that we need to look ahead to Matthew 26:69-75. Let me set the stage for you. At some point in the night, Jesus went to pray. Soon afterward Judas, along with a large, armed crowd, found Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was arrested and, according to 26:56, all the disciples "left him and fled." He was then brought to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest where a secret meeting happened between the scribes and the elders.

To Peter's credit, he came back to find Jesus. Matthew 26:58 tells us what he did - "And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end." He was trying to gather information as to what is happening to Jesus without getting too close. Peter was trying to keep a safe distance from the trouble.

While Peter was in the courtyard of the High Priest, his fidelity to Jesus was tested directly. This is the record of Peter's famous denial of Jesus; notice how it progresses.

- **Pretend** - Verse 69 tells us that a servant girl³ approached him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." Peter was afraid that the people (including the guards) would take him into custody. Therefore, he pretends that he doesn't know what she means. In front of all those who had heard what she said (v 70) Peter said, "I do not know what you mean." He acts as if he is confused. He pretends.
- **Lie** - Verse 71 tells us that Peter changed locations. He moved from the courtyard to near the gate. While he is standing there, he overhears another servant girl talking about him.

³ John 18:15-18 tells us that she was the door keeper, and that she let Peter in because of the words from another disciple (John?) instructing her to allow him into the courtyard.

She said, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." Peter no longer pretends that he is confused; he lies about his association with Jesus and adds an oath. He invokes a curse on himself if he is lying by appealing to something sacred. It would be like saying, "I swear on the temple, I do not know the man." The oath is meant to convince people that he is telling the truth. But we know that Peter has just moved from acting like he is confused to a clear repudiation of Jesus. He is a long ways from "though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away" (26:33). It gets worse.

- **Act Out** – Apparently the pressure gets even greater as more people begin asking Peter about his connection to Jesus. Verse 73 tells us that they said, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." Peter now takes his denial to another level. Not only does he deny Jesus, but he acts in a way that he hopes will prove that he is no disciple. He denies with his words and actions. He vigorously tries to convince them that he doesn't know Jesus by acting very sinfully. Verse 74 says that he invoked a curse on himself and began to swear. He began to use vulgar language and probably said something like, "If I'm lying, may God strike me dead or send me to Hell." Others suggest that he may have actually cursed Jesus – "I don't know that _____, _____, man." His words were meant to be shocking and thereby confirming that he could not be a disciple and talk like that.

Peter, when faced with the fear and pressure of being associated with Jesus in crisis, momentarily falls away. Peter is a long ways from his boastful comments just a few hours earlier. His denial moved from bad to worse to unthinkable as he pretends not to understand, lie, and then act in a defaming way.

Verses 74-75 deliver the punch line: "And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the words of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." Jesus was right; Peter was not as sure-footed, courageous, special, or spiritual as what he had thought. "Peter boasted he would die before he denied Jesus, but he does not even respond truthfully to a query from a powerless servant girl."⁴ He had not only proven his foolishness; he had deserted his friend and Savior. He had betrayed the Son of God.

The effect on Peter is dramatic and powerful. Verse 75 says that "he went out and wept bitterly." Peter's grief was overwhelming. To weep bitterly is a phrase used to describe a loud expression of pain or sorrow. It means to wail, the kind of emotion that springs from deep, deep grief.

Peter has fallen. His denial is disappointing, but his spiritual overconfidence is what makes this story tragic.

⁴ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2008), 643.

What Jesus Can Do

Remember that Jesus had predicted all of this, and he told his disciples that he would go before and meet them in Galilee (26:31-32). Don't miss this. Jesus was planning to come to them even though they abandoned him. Their temporary falling away and betrayal would not deter his love for them. Jesus will initiate their restoration.

The Apostle John records the personal restoration and recommissioning of Peter. The conversation takes place on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee after Jesus appeared to the disciples.

"15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." 16 He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-18)

Jesus graciously invites Peter to reaffirm his love for him and his willingness to be a follower. This exchange is an intimate moment of restoration as Jesus pulls out of Peter a three-fold profession of his love. Jesus knows Peter better than Peter knows himself. And even after a foolish boast and an awful denial, Jesus still pursues Peter and restores him. This is an amazing picture of how Jesus works.

Where is Your Confidence?

I am so grateful that this story is recorded in the Bible because it warns and encourages us at many levels. It begs us to ask where our confidence lies? Let me give you some summary thoughts:

1. Spiritual overconfidence is our first and greatest problem. The belief that you are more righteous, spiritually stronger, and better than others is the first thing which God must conquer in your heart for you to come to Christ for your salvation. Even if you aren't "spiritual" or "religious" you can be guilty of overconfidence as you consider yourself more honest than others – "At least I'm not a hypocrite." Spiritual overconfidence is the target of Romans 3:10-12 – "None is righteous, no, not one no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." The issue is not just one among the bad; it is worse than all others because it convinces you that you don't have any need. It blinds you to the reality of who you really are.

2. **It is a great mercy for God to tell us what we are really like.** The message of the Bible is at first offensive because it holds up a spiritual mirror (James 1:23), but without this confrontation we would not know about the danger that we are in.
3. **Don't let your past hold you, but don't forget who you used to be.** There is an importance balance to maintain in how you view your past. The key is see the past as past, covered by the blood of Jesus. But we always need to remember what kind of people we were apart from Jesus.

15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life (1 Tim 1:15-16)

4. **Rest your faith not on your ability to be faithful but on Jesus's ability to keep you faithful.** There should always be a healthy fear of what you could be or how easy it would be for you to stumble. So be careful about the things that you "swear" you'll never do. Be careful of the things in which you are so confident. Remember, that if faithfulness depended on you, it would a hopeless cause. "But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil 3:12).
5. **Be sure there are people in your life (intentionally invasive relationships) to shatter your spiritual overconfidence.** We need people to fulfill Hebrews 4:12-13 in our lives.

12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

6. **When you fail, take heart and run to Jesus.** There is a reason why this story is in the New Testament. It tells us a lot about Peter, but it tells us more about Jesus. It reminds us that he knows how weak we are, and when we fail – in big and small ways – Jesus is willing to graciously restore those who are truly repentant. Our hope doesn't come from our assumptions about ourselves but our assurance in who **he** is.

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23). Our confidence comes from who **he** is, not who we are or what we won't do.

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