

Why Peter Denied Christ

by Johnny L. Sanders

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| TITLE: | Why Peter Denied Christ |
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| OBJECTIVE: | Did Peter deny Jesus because He feared death, or was it a different kind of fear? Dr. Johnny Sanders shares inspiring and informative insights into the fear that Peter dealt with, not only in Jerusalem but on other occasions as well. This message will "force" a faithful Christian to consider a new level of boldness in sharing his or her faith with others. |

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Introduction

Peter is held in high esteem by Christians today. There is, however, one disturbing blemish on his record. He denied Christ. I visited a Sunday School class for fifth and sixth grade children a number of years ago and heard one of our deacons ask, "Why did Peter deny Christ?" After allowing a little time for discussion, he supplied the answer, "He was scared." I know that is the answer one expects to hear when that question is asked, but while I do not question Scripture, I do sometimes challenge traditional interpretations. Before calling Simon Peter a coward, picture yourself in a dark garden with the only light coming from lighted torches. You are standing beside the slave of the high priest when a man many remember by the title, The Big Fisherman, draws a sword and take a swing at the man by your side. The slave's ear is severed, but from the force of the swing you know he was not swinging at the ear. Do you think you would have called him a coward at that moment? Neither would I, so I would like for us to dig a little deeper today.

There is no disputing the fact that Peter denied Jesus Christ. Not just once, not twice, but three times he denied the Messiah with whom he had followed for three years. As we see in the story of David and Bathsheba, the Lord does not gloss over the sins of His people, so we should not be surprised that the account of his denial is recorded in the Gospels. For centuries, however, people have been trying to figure out why Peter would deny Jesus. How could Simon Peter, of all people, deny his Lord? That is as shocking as Abraham's flight to Egypt where he lied about Sarah being his wife.

Wasn't this the apostle who promised to be faithful to Him, even unto death?

My purpose today is not to try to make excuses for Simon Peter's shocking sin, nor is it to gloss over something that happened just that one night. In fact, I also hold him in high esteem. I am not challenging the record of Simon Peter as an apostle, missionary, preacher, or Scripture writer. I do, however, reject any suggestion that Peter was the first pope. He had both a wife and a mother-in-law, either of which would have disqualified him. Paul wrote that Peter's wife traveled with him. There is more. My good friend, Dr. Bill Cooper of England has written an amazing book entitled, *OLD LIGHT ON THE ROMAN CHURCH*, in which he states that the first bishop of the Roman church was Linus, son of Caradoc, a mighty king and military commander from the Island of Britton who defeated the best Rome could send against him in thirty pitched battles before he was betrayed by a relative and his family was captured. Caradoc surrendered, but when forced to stand before the Roman Emperor he refused to bow. Instead, he gave him a piece of his mind. Those present insisted that he was too brave to be put to death. His family was sent to live in the home of a godly lady whose husband was for some time a Roman senator. Many members of this family were saved, including Linus and Claudia, who married Lady Pamponia's son Rufus Pudens. Claudia wrote many of the hymns the early church sang. The second bishop of the Roman church was a man named Anacletus, and the third was Clement, who laid some of the doctrinal stones upon which the Catholic church would be built.

Today, I would like for us to look at the fact that Simon Peter denied Jesus Christ. Then, I would like for us to consider reasons I reject the traditional conclusion as to why he denied Him. Next, I would like for us to see how our understanding of Peter's denial of Christ could make a difference in our own experience today.

I. No One Can Dispute The Fact That Peter Denied Jesus.

A. Jesus Had Prophesied that Peter would Deny Him

(John 13:37)

During His farewell address to the eleven apostles, after Judas had departed to betray Him, Jesus sought to prepare the faithful apostles for what was to come. John records the conversation: "Lord," Simon Peter said to Him, "where are You going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you will follow later" (John 13:36). Peter pledged his loyalty, devotion, and support to Jesus: "Lord," Peter asked, "why can't I follow You now? I will lay down my life for You!" To this, "Jesus replied, 'Will you lay down your life for Me? I assure you: A rooster will not crow until you have denied Me three times'" (John 13:37-38).

B. Peter Shockingly Denied Jesus Three Times.

The account of Peter's denial of Jesus is found in all four of the Gospels, but I would like for us to read John's account in John 18. One reason I like to read something like this in the Gospel According to John is that the disciple Jesus loved had a way of providing little historical tid-bits of information not given in the other Gospels. John tells provides us with the little extras, like the fact that there was plenty of green grass in the area where Jesus fed the huge multitude with a child's lunch. Here, we learn that the temple police arrested Jesus, tied Him, and led him away to appear before Annas, father-in-law to Caiaphas, the current high priest. John reveals that Peter was not the only one who followed Jesus back to from Gethsemane to the home of Annas. There was another disciples, and I am convinced that it was John himself. The aged John is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and he is also giving his personal testimony.

Jesus had been betrayed by Judas and arrested by the temple police in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Meanwhile Simon Peter was following Jesus, as was another disciple. That disciple was an acquaintance of the high priest; so he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard. But Peter remained standing outside by the door. So the other disciple, the one known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the girl who was the doorkeeper and brought Peter in (John 18:15-16).

1) Peter denied knowing Jesus when asked by a slave girl: "Then the slave girl who was the doorkeeper said to Peter, 'You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?' 'I am not!' he said" (vs. 17). John provides another historical note: "Now the slaves and the temple police had

made a charcoal fire, because it was cold. They were standing there warming themselves, and Peter was standing with them, warming himself" (vs. 18). Annas, the former high priest, who was still a major influence among the religious leaders in Jerusalem, questioned Jesus and "Then Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest" (18:24).

2) John continues the story, to which he must have been a personal witness. He wrote, "Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They said to him, 'You aren't one of His disciples too, are you?' He denied it and said, 'I am not!'"

3) Immediately after that, Peter denied His Lord a third time. "One of the high priest's slaves, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, said, 'Didn't I see you with Him in the garden?' Peter then denied it again. Immediately a rooster crowed" (John 18:26-27).

II. Peter Did Not Deny Jesus Because He Was A Coward.

A. If Peter Feared for His Life, Most Could Understand

Even If Peter Had Denied Jesus out of Fear for His Life, Most Would Understand That.

Matthew, in Chapter 8 (vv 23-27), tell us about the time Jesus and the twelve apostles were caught in a storm in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Listen to the words from Matthew:

Suddenly, a violent storm arose on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves. But He was sleeping. So the disciples came and woke Him up, saying, "Lord, save [us]! We're going to die!" But He said to them, "Why are you fearful, you of little faith?" Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea. And there was a great calm. The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? - even the winds and the sea obey Him!" (Matt 8:24-27).

We are told that a wind can sweep down through a mountains valley northeast of the Sea of Galilee and turn the surface of the water into a churning mass of death dealing waves before a boat in the middle could reach the safety of the shore. It can become a raging sea. Under these conditions, Simon Peter, who had made his living fishing on the Sea of Galilee, was understandably frightened. Four of the apostles, Peter and Andrew, and James and John were all fishermen who had no doubt battled storms on this great lake before, and if they were frightened it is understandable that the others were in a state of panic. Yes, Simon Peter knew what fear was, and there was every reason for him to have been frightened the night Jesus was arrested. However, I do not believe that was the primary reason he denied Jesus that night.

B. Simon Peter Had Demonstrated His Courage Time and Again.

1) Peter had made his living fishing on the Sea of Galilee. That was no work for a coward. He had been frightened the night Jesus calmed the storm, but this sea was no place for a person who lacked courage. Louis Carlisle, one of our neighbors near Sledge, Mississippi, where I grew up, told me that he and his brother Tom decided to do some commercial fishing one winter after they finished picking their cotton. They had three months when they could not farm, so they built a boat, bought and outboard motor, and got all the equipment they would need, and began this new enterprise. Once evening, Louis told me, they got caught in a whirlpool in the Mississippi River. He said, "Tom ran the motor wide open and we circled around inside the whirlpool. I was holding onto both sides of the boat, and when I looked to the side I could only see a wall water. We were below the surface of the river. Tom kept circling with the whirlpool and climbing closer to the top until he was finally able to escape the whirlpool." He had really been scared. This was only one of many, many stories I heard about whirlpools in the Mississippi River. A fisherman could fish on that river for a lifetime and never be caught in a whirlpool like that, but he had to be prepared for anything.

2) Peter had been with Jesus in Jerusalem when religious leaders has stirred up the people to get them to stone Jesus. Since Jesus was aware of the plots to have Him killed, it is reasonable to assume that Peter and the other apostles were aware of the fact that religious leaders in Jerusalem were plotting against Him. They realized that they were in danger when they went to Jerusalem with Him.

3) When news reached Jesus that His friend Lazarus was sick, Jesus tarried where they were for two days and then said that they were going to Bethany. They were surprised, but Jesus assured them that Lazarus was dead. In fact, when they arrived at Bethany he had been in the grave four days. When Jesus made His announcement, His disciples reminded Him that they had tried to stone Him the last time He was there. When they saw that Jesus was determined to go, Thomas said, "Let's go so that we may die with Him" (John 11:16). Peter from going with them all the way.

4) When soldiers and temple police showed up with Judas to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, "...Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. (The slave's name was Malchus.)" (John 18:10). Let me remind you that Peter did not grab a sword from one of the soldiers, he took one with him, and it seems logical that his purpose was to protect his Master if it meant his own death. He was ready to lay down his life for Jesus. Remember also that Peter had a wife and a home in Capernaum. This was not a decision he would have made lightly. It took courage to prepare to defend Jesus, and while it did not serve the Lord's purpose, Peter's action demonstrated his willingness to lay down his life for his Lord that night.

Peter was no coward, in the usual sense of the word. I realize some have accused him of cowardice, based on the one translation that says "Peter followed from afar." However, the HCSB stresses that Peter and another disciple, whom I believe to have been John, followed the soldiers and temple police, and their prisoner back to the home of Annas. John was permitted to enter the court yard, where he got permission for Peter to enter. If it was not cowardice in the usual sense of the word that cause Peter to deny Jesus, how do we account for his denial of the Messiah three times.

III. Peter Denied Jesus For The Same Reason Many Deny Him Today.

A. Peter Denied Jesus Because of a Different Kind of Fear.

1) He did not deny Jesus out of fear for his life. How do we know that? Jesus had identified Himself to the soldiers and guards, and then He asked them to let His disciples go, and they did (John 18:8-9). They were free to leave and go back to Galilee, or to stay in Jerusalem and witness what would happen to Jesus. Their lives were not at risk at this time.

2) Fear for one's life, health, wealth, and wealth is a powerful force, but Peter does not deny Jesus for any of those reasons. There are soldiers who risk their lives on the battle field, but return home and quiver at the thought of making a speech when they receive an award, or recognition for their service. There are men who run businesses, make decisions, and hire and fire men and women, who cannot bring themselves to pray in public. There are war heroes who would tremble at the thought of speaking to a child about Jesus. They are simply afraid they might embarrass themselves.

B. Peter Denied Jesus Because of a Special Kind of the Fear.

1) Peter was ready to die for Jesus in the Garden, but denied Him in the courtyard. When he drew the sword he was not bluffing. He took a swing at the high priest's slave and cut off his ear. I don't know anyone who really believes Peter was swinging at the man's ear. He was trying to cut off his head! He had to know that his attack could have led to a slaughter there in the Garden of Gethsemane, but he still attacked. His action was not wise, but it was courageous. The man who is called The Big Fisherman may not have looked like David with a sword, but in the vernacular, he showed that he had guts. Excuse me, he had intestinal fortitude. So why did he deny Jesus in the courtyard? I will call it the fear of ridicule, the fear of being mocked, the fear that someone would laugh at him.

2) He did not deny Jesus to any official. To whom did he deny Him? To a slave girl! Look at John 18:17. Peter was not being interrogated by soldiers, the temple guard, or a member of the Sanhedrin. He was asked a question by a slave girl. What authority did she have over him? None whatsoever.

What is the very worst thing this slave girl could do to him? She could laugh at him! Other slaves might have joined her in making fun of Peter. John doesn't tell us that they did, but they might have.

Someone might have said, "Man, you really picked a winner!" They might have said, "That man really made a fool of you, didn't he?" They might have said, "How does it feel to have spent three years of your life following a charlatan?" They might have said those things, but then they might not have said them. Peter denied Jesus to slaves in the courtyard. These people had no authority over him. What was the worst thing they could do to Peter? They could laugh at him. They could mock him. But, don't you laugh at Peter!

3) Don't laugh at Simon Peter until you confess your temptation to yield to the same sin. Don't tell me there has never been a time when you hesitated to speak to someone for the Lord because you were a little uneasy about the response. There are soldiers who have distinguished themselves in Iraq or Afghanistan who may well be afraid to speak to a twelve year old boy about his need for Jesus. I believe it was Martin Luther who said, "If you do not confess Christ at the point of attack, you have denied Him, no matter how loudly you profess Him." I will confess that I found it easier to speak to a "captive audience" in the Hinds County Jail and in the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, than to speak to some individuals in their homes when I was a young pastor.

C. NT Evidence Concerning Peter's Fear of Ridicule

There Is Evidence in the NT that Peter Had a Serious Problem with the Fear of Ridicule.

1) He took precautions before going to the home of Cornelius (Acts.10). The Lord used a vision to prepare Peter to receive the messengers from Cornelius, who extended their master's invitation to come to his home to tell them about Jesus. Peter went to the home of the Gentile Centurion Cornelius, but he took some Jewish friends with him. This was an unusual situation, but the Lord was working from both sides. To be perfectly honest, I believe that was a wise decision, but some believe he was determined to have Jewish witnesses with him who could testify as to his involvement with these Gentiles. I would not press that point. Later, at the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15; Gal. 2), Peter's testimony about how the Lord saved these Gentiles helped win the victory for Paul and Barnabas, who had reported that Gentiles were saved on their great missionary journey.

2) Peter became a backslider in Antioch. At the Jerusalem Conference, it was agreed that Gentiles are saved the same way as Jews (by grace through faith). James, the half-brother of our Lord, wrote the "opinion" of the Conference, and Paul and Barnabas took it back to Antioch and read it before the church. They were seeing some amazing results at Antioch, which may have led Simon Peter and others to visit that church. Paul tells us that Peter joined in the fellowship with Gentiles, until he looked up and saw some Jews from Jerusalem there, and he withdrew himself from the Gentiles in a manner that jeopardized the victory. You may read the account in Galatians 2:11-14, but let me read verse 14: "But when I saw that they were deviating from the truth of the gospel, I told Cephas in front of everyone, 'If you, who are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel Gentiles to live like Jews?'" (Gal 2:14). Paul called it what it was: hypocrisy!

D. Fear of Ridicule Paralyzes Many Believers Today.

1) Peter showed no sign of this fear on the day of Pentecost, when he preached the first sermon ever preached following the Ascension of our Lord. The key was that he preached that sermon in the power of the Holy Spirit, Who had just come to indwell believers. Peter showed none of the fear when he and John told the Sanhedrin, "We must obey God rather than man." God give His servants a victory over all kinds of fear, so that we may become effective witnesses for Jesus Christ.

When I was the Youth Pastor at First Baptist Church, Rayville, Louisiana, during my seminary days, Dr. D. Wade Armstrong was our evangelist for one revival. He was Director of Evangelism for the General Southern Baptist Convention of California and Nevada. Soul winning was his obsession. He would lead people in going up and down streets knocking on doors, and saying to anyone who answered the door, "My name is Wade Armstrong and I would like to talk with you about God." He said he got into one home in ten with that approach. He and I visited together during the week and I saw him win a number of people to faith in Christ. As we walked up to one door, he said to me, "I never walk up to a door and start to ring the door bell without the thought hitting me: maybe they won't be home. I confess that I understand.

Dr. Armstrong told me that when, as a youth, he had gone forward in a worship service and announced to his pastor that the Lord was calling him into the ministry, he surprised the people in his home church. He was extremely shy. After the service, he overheard a man say, "That boy can't preach. He can't look you in the eye and speak when he meets you on the street." He said the man was right. Because of his quiet personality I could see that he may well have been extremely shy as a youth. This is a certain kind of fear, but it is not the kind of fear that says, "Maybe they won't be home." Dr. Armstrong would sit down and engage an individual, or a whole family in a conversation about the Lord. But there was still a temptation to fear some possible rejection. Or even the fear of ridicule.

I had an opportunity to see how Dr. Armstrong dealt with ridicule. We went into a store to visit a man whose daughter had asked him to speak with her father about his need for Jesus Christ. When we entered the business the owner was talking with a friend and he used the word "hell" in a way that suggested that he was accustomed to using the word in conversations. Dr. Armstrong introduced himself to the man, who made a joke of the fact that he had used the word "hell" in front of preachers, and then added, "Of course, you preachers say hell, too, don't you?" Dr. Armstrong said, "Yes, and I believe in it." The man said, "I know some of those people at that church put you up to coming to see me. But, I want you to know that they are worse than I am." Dr. Armstrong said, "Mr. Brown, is your daughter a worse person than you?" The man said, "No! She is a fine person." Dr. Armstrong said, in his quiet, dignified way, "Your daughter is the only person who has ever mentioned your name to me." The man became quiet and listened, but did not commit himself to the Lord. After all, there were other people standing there listening.

This fear is lurking in the heart of many would be witnesses for Jesus Christ today. Since we don't like to confess fear, at least any fear for which the psychologist has no cure, many Christians may remain in denial. There! That is a good psychological term. This is the reason many who profess Jesus as Lord deny Him before lost people by refusing to witness to them. It explains why many who profess to be Christians deny Jesus before others who profess to believe in God by refusing to take a stand on moral or doctrinal issues.

E. Victory Over Fear Of Witnessing

The Lord Will Give You a Victory Over Any Fear That Keeps You from Being His Witness.

1) Peter repented with bitter tears after denying His Lord. After he denied the Lord, and then heard the rooster crow, what did he do? He didn't deny that he had denied Jesus, did he? He confessed his sin and repented. His life after that tells us that the Lord gave him the victory. In the first chapters of Acts we learn what a powerful witness he was for Christ. He was not perfect, and he did backslide at Antioch. I am sure he was tempted at other times to yield to this temptation, but the Holy Spirit gave him the victory over it and Peter became one of the most powerful witnesses of the First Century. How was Peter rewarded for his faithfulness and courage. He was one of many martyrs who laid down their lives for Christ, just as Jesus had prophesied.

2) If we are to become effective witnesses for Jesus Christ, we must follow Peter's example. If, or when we experience this fear we must confess it and repent. He will forgive you and fill you with the Holy Spirit, who will guide you and empower you to be the witness He wants you to be.

CONCLUSION. There is a renewed effort going on in the Southern Baptist Convention to encourage our members to become effective witnesses for our Lord. Whether or not we decide to participate in those evangelism programs, God expects you and me to be His witnesses in our community, and wherever we go. He not only expects it, He commands it. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20). Jesus stated in Acts 1:8 that they would fulfill that commission once they were empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will direct you, empower you, equip you, and motivate you to share the Gospel with lost people. Will you join me in confessing that we need to experience a victory over any fear that would keep us from being the witness Jesus expects us to be? Peter repented and the Lord used him mightily. He is not looking for flawless people to be His witnesses, He is looking for forgive people. He is not looking for savvy people, He is looking for saved people. Do you need to confess that you need His forgiveness today? Ask Him to fill you with His Holy Spirit so that you may

experience the victory yourself, and see the victory in the lives of others?

Sometimes, the most effective witness in a church will be the new Christian who is eager to share his experience with others. He or she will assume that their lost friends will be anxious to hear what has happened to them. It is only after some of those friends reject their testimony, and they reject them that they experience the kind of fear that robs the individual of the joy of sharing his testimony and denies the lost friend the message of salvation. If you have experienced that kind of fear, you must confess it, repent, and permit the Holy Spirit to bless you, guide you, and empower you to be His witness.