

April 10, 2022

Peter on Trial **Matthew 26:69-75**

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Two trials were actually taking place that evening. Jesus was on trial before Caiaphas and the rest of the Sanhedrin. But outside that courtroom, outside in a courtyard, Peter also was on trial. Peter had already had something of a night. Earlier, when Jesus was washing the disciples' feet, it was Peter who had objected, "*You must never wash my feet.*" And then when Jesus explained to Peter why He was doing this, Peter overenthusiastically cried out, "*Then not my feet only but also my hands and my head!*"¹ And then, after the Passover meal, as they were walking to the Mount of Olives, Jesus had announced that all of the disciples would fall away from Him before the night was over. Again, it was Peter who had protested, saying, "*Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.*"² Brave words. Boasting words that the other disciples probably did not appreciate. And then Jesus had answered Peter by telling him, specifically, that not only would he, Peter, fall away, but that before the night was done, before the rooster crowed, Peter would deny even knowing Jesus three separate times. Peter's response: "*Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.*"³

And then, when they had reached the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus selected Peter and James and John to come keep watch over Him while He prayed. Peter, along with the other two, had instead fallen asleep. The first time Jesus caught them sleeping, He admonished them, especially Peter one would imagine, that instead of sleeping they should be praying not to enter into temptation. Jesus then went back to His prayer – and Peter promptly went back to sleep. The same thing happened yet again, a third time.⁴ And after that had come Judas' betrayal and Jesus' arrest. Peter had a sword on him, for some reason, and he had drawn it and struck off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus rebuked Peter sharply and healed the servant's ear.⁵ As I said, Peter had already had quite a night.

But now here Peter was sitting outside the courtroom where Jesus was on trial, sitting out in a courtyard around a fire with, one imagines, a number of servants and soldiers and such. And as Jesus is put on trial indoors regarding whether or not He claims to be the Messiah, Peter was put on trial out in that courtyard as to whether or not he was with Jesus, whether or not he was one of Jesus' disciples. Perhaps we should note, in Peter's defense, that of the twelve he alone had not fallen away from Jesus yet, as Jesus had predicted. He was still near to Jesus – as near as he dared, given that he had drawn a sword on the high priest's servant just a little earlier in the evening. But there the second trial, Peter's trial, begins.

Three times the question was put to him, the question of whether or not he was associated with this Jesus on trial inside – whether or not Peter was one of his disciples. The first time Peter

just simply denies it, saying, *“I do not know what you mean.”* The second time, he ramps up his denial, adding an oath: *“I swear I do not know the man.”* The third time – perhaps reflecting Peter’s increasing fear or increasing guilt or increasing desperation – the third time he both curses and swears an oath: *“I do not know the man.”* Three denials, just as Jesus had said. And no sooner has the third one left his mouth than the rooster crows – also just as Jesus said: *“Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.”*⁶ Scripture says that as soon as Peter heard the rooster, he remembered what Jesus had said. And he understood in that moment precisely what he had done – what he swore to Jesus he would never do. And Peter broke down – bitter tears rolling down his face, like raindrops rolling off the face of a rock.

Why are the gospels so intent on telling us about Peter’s failure? I mean, it happened, clearly – it’s part of the historical record of that night. But all four gospels tell this story of Peter’s three denials in some detail – they linger on Peter’s failure for a significant moment, before continuing on with the story of Jesus’ trial, sentencing, and death. I suspect it is because we are intended to see in Peter’s failure our own failures – recognize our sins in his. For we human beings have been doing precisely this to God since the Garden of Eden – turning our backs on Him, refusing to acknowledge Him before men, denying Him His rightful place in our hearts and in our lives. In Peter’s sin we find the template of our own. For do we not do the same? Acknowledge Him when it is easy and convenient and serves our purposes; ignore Him and deny Him and defy Him when it is not?

I remember something the great Christian philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard once said. He talked about the way we treat our religion, our life with God, as something we keep on the side, distanced from our real daily living. *“Upon occasion,”* he wrote, *“we exhort Christians to ‘take Christ into the workplace’ or ‘bring Christ into the home.’ But doesn’t this only point to the deadly assumption that Christians normally leave Christ [out]?”*⁷ Can any of us honestly claim that we do not do this – that we do not turn our backs routinely on God, deny Him entrance into certain aspects of our lives, and often think and live as if we don’t really know Him at all? In Peter’s denial, we see our own. In Peter’s trial, the rooster’s verdict also falls upon us.

But that leads to a second reason why the gospels linger so on Peter’s three denials. Not just as a way to highlight our common human failing before God, but also to set into even more glorious relief what it is that Jesus is doing, has done, on behalf of sinners. For Jesus does not flinch from His trial that night. Nor does He turn His back on those whom He has come to save, no matter how truly we are undeserving. There before the High Priest, He does not deny His love for us, His union with us, His desire for us – but instead bears His connection with us, bears our sin and weakness and denials of Him on His shoulders all the way to His death of the cross. His death on the cross for the likes of Peter, James and John and all the rest who ran away that night – His saving death on the cross even for me and for you. Even as we deny Him, Christ willingly goes forth to die for us.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, seems genuinely staggered by the thought that it was while we were still sinners like Peter, even enemies of God like Judas – still Jesus willingly bore the cross for our sake. *“For one will scarcely die for a righteous person,”* Paul writes. *“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*⁸ Peter fails Jesus, just as we still fail Jesus. But Jesus never fails in His love for Peter, never fails in His saving love for

you and me. He bears the cross. He not only bears the cross, but from the cross pronounces His verdict upon Peter's trial and upon us all. "*Father,*" He cries out in His agony, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*"⁹ His verdict upon all who have denied Him: "*Father, forgive them.*" And by His death on that cross, we are indeed forgiven – Peter, and James and John and the rest, and you and me.

¹ John 13:6-10.

² Matthew 26:33.

³ Matthew 26:35.

⁴ Matthew 26:36-45.

⁵ John 18:10-11, Luke 22:49-51.

⁶ Matthew 26:34.

⁷ Dallas Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p. 28.

⁸ Romans 5:7-8.

⁹ Luke 23:34.