

Series: Mark

Title: Staying Safe from Spiritual Failure, Part 2

Text: Mark 14:66-72

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Verse 66

In verse 66, Mark returned to the story about Peter's denial. He said, "While Peter was in the courtyard below, one of the high priest's maidservants came" (Mark 14:66). The reference to "the courtyard below" suggested that Jesus' trial was held in some sort of room or balcony overlooking the courtyard.¹ From Luke's Gospel (Luke 22:61), we learn that Jesus remained within eyesight of Peter the entire time.

The fact that Peter remained within such close proximity of Jesus is commendable. Sometimes we are too quick to condemn the apostle. Certainly he made his mistakes, but he did demonstrate a degree of courage. Sure, he denied the Lord and he was unwilling to take a bold stand in Jesus' darkest hour. However, entering the courtyard was risky. Peter was courageous, but fear got the better of him. His faith was weak. One has summarized the situation, saying, "It is instructive to realize that he is better remembered for his denial than he is for the degree of faithfulness he demonstrated. Sometimes we malign Peter. We should remember that he was the only one of the disciples who took even this risk. But his testimony underlines the fact that even the bravest and brashiest of them failed on that night."²

In reading the four different gospel accounts of Peter's details, it is difficult to sort out all of the different characters, statements, and denials that were made. Many things were likely said by many different people. One should not regard any of the gospel writers as giving a conclusive account of the event. Each one picked up on different details from the event.

Mark focused on a "maidservant" who recognized Peter. The language of the text was customarily used of a female slave.³ John's Gospel revealed that she was a doorkeeper who kept a watch on the entrance of the courtyard in which Jesus was tried (John 18:17). Peter's denial in the face of such a young servant girl made his failure all the more embarrassing. Once again, we see that the early church was not afraid to incur less than flattering details about the disciples. Their willingness to do so proves the truthfulness of the Gospel accounts.

Verse 67

Seeing Peter, the maidservant immediately questioned him about his identity. Mark said, "When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, 'You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth'" (Mark 14:67). Those gathered in the courtyard would have needed warmth from a fire. The March and April nights in first-century Jerusalem were often quite chilly.⁴ The fact that Peter stopped to warm himself gave witness to his preoccupation with his own comfort.⁵ Peter stands as a warning for us. We should always be on guard when earthly matters take precedent over spiritual matters.

The Greek language of the text placed emphasis light produced by a fire.⁶ The author's intent was to convey the idea that the fire revealed the shadowy visage of Peter's face. In the glow produced by the blaze, the servant girl took note of Peter's appearance.

¹ Robertson, 389.

² Ferguson, 250.

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 101.

⁴ Brooks, [CD-Rom].

⁵ Brooks, [CD-Rom].

⁶ Ryle, 260.

It shouldn't be regarded as strange that the maidservant had recognized Peter. Jesus and His disciples hadn't really maintained a low profile during the holy week. Maybe she had seen the men during one of their public appearances in the temple vicinity (Mark 11:8 17-18, 32; 12:12-37). Perhaps she was actually in the garden as Jesus was arrested. This latter scenario seems possible, since it was a servant of the High Priest Peter attacked with a sword (Mark 14:47). The maidservant would have likely worked with the man who lost his ear. If she was actually in the Garden of Gethsemane, it is for good reason that she recognized Peter.

Verse 68

In verse 68, Peter strongly denied the maidservant's comment. Mark recorded, "But he denied it: 'I don't know or understand what you're talking about.' Then he went out to the entryway, and a rooster crowed" (Mark 14:68). According to Matthew 26:73, Peter used the difference in regional dialects as an excuse for not understanding what the servant girl said. The "entryway" was most likely the same location mentioned back in 14:54. The term referred to the forecourt, the entrance to the courtyard in which Jesus was tried. By going back to the location, Peter retreated from his association with Jesus. The way in which Peter shirked away was significant, considering Jesus' grand pronouncement in Mark 8:38 — "For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Despite Peter's retreat, we should detect a degree of courage in his actions. He did not completely forsake his master. He still stayed in the courtyard. Maybe he remembered Jesus' words and simply sought a more secretive location away from the fire.⁷ Did he attempt to stay near Jesus? It seems so. He certainly knew he was in a dangerous situation. Why didn't he completely flee?

The answer seems to be that Peter was governed by competing desires. He wanted to stay by Jesus' side, but he wasn't willing to take a bold stand. He was guilty of the sad spiritual state spoken of in James 1:8 — a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. Be aware. Spiritual wishy-washiness will result in spiritual failure. Attempting to live for both the world and the Lord never works. Hear the admonition of Joshua — "But if it doesn't please you to worship the Lord, choose for yourselves today: Which will you worship—the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living? As for me and my family, we will worship the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

Verse 69

Even in the entryway, Peter could not find solace and secrecy. He was recognized once again. Mark 14:69 said, "When the maidservant saw him again, she began to tell those standing nearby, 'This man is one of them.'" The Greek translated "this man" contained derogatory language.⁸ The maidservant issued an insult toward Peter. Things were certainly heating up. With stout words and name calling, one from the High Priest's household was alerting others to the presence of a criminal. Peter was certainly in danger.

Verse 70

Verse 70 set the stage for Peter's final denial. It said, "But again he denied it. After a little while those standing there said to Peter again, 'You certainly are one of them, since you're also a Galilean'" (Mark 14:70). The word translated "denied" appeared in the imperfect mood; thus, it depicted a continual event in the past. The idea was that Peter repeatedly denied any association with Jesus.⁹

⁷ Schnabel, 388.

⁸ Schnabel, 389.

⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 101.

The reference to Peter's Galilean background was based on cultural norms. As mentioned earlier, Peter had a distinct dialect. In Matthew 26:73, he used the difference in his speech as an excuse for not being able to understand what the maidservant said. According to historical accounts, Galileans were known for pronouncing Hebrew letters differently. They pronounced an aleph as if it was an ayin, and they pronounced an ayin as if it was an aleph.¹⁰ It may be doubtful that Peter spoke Hebrew on this occasion, but the reality remains — his speech was distinct. It identified him as being from Galilee. While Peter had used his accent as a cover, it was now working against him. The folks in the courtyard were putting two and two together. The man being tried was from Galilee. Certainly the foreigner in their midst must have known the man!

Verse 71

Fearful of being labelled as an acquaintance of Jesus, Peter became indignant in his denials. Mark recorded, "Then he started to curse and swear, 'I don't know this man you're talking about!'" (Mark 14:71). Sensing danger, Peter amped up his rhetoric. The word translated "curse" is the word from which we get our word anathema.¹¹ It had "the notion of calling down curses on one's self."¹² It meant "to invoke consequences if what one says is not true."¹³ Perhaps it was sometimes used in a vulgar sense, similar to the way in which some use "damn" nowadays. In effect, Peter was saying "If what I am saying is not true, may I be damned or sent to hell!" Or, as one has said, the meaning could have been, "Go to hell for making such accusations against me!"¹⁴

The word "swear" should not be regarded according to modern uses of the term. For Jews, swearing was based on an Old Testament practice of vow making. See Leviticus 7:16, 22:18; Psalm 22:25, 50:14, 56:12, 61:5, 76:11, 116:14, 116:18; and Proverbs 20:25 for references to this practice. If one wanted to attest to the veracity of a statement or action, one would often make a vow before the Lord. Peter fell back on ancient Jewish practices. He made a solemn vow that he did not know Jesus. Under Mosaic Law, a false vow was a serious offense (Numbers 30:2).

At best, Peter was in danger of being forced to serve as a witness in Jesus' trial. At worst, there was a possibility he could have been identified as the one who brutally injured the servant of the High Priest (Mark 14:47). If he was marked for the later crime, Peter would have been subject to the same trial as Jesus. He was certainly in danger.

To categorically deny any association with Jesus, Peter said, "I don't know this man you're talking about." Peter used diminutive and dismissive language of our Lord. He claimed he had not knowledge of Jesus' name or identity.¹⁵ His confession in our text stood in stark contrast to his bold profession in Mark 8:29. Instead of being a witness for his Lord, Peter used his mouth to utter obscene language. His speech was borderline blasphemy. He made a vow in vain, invoking the holy things of the Lord to deny any association with Jesus. Like Moses, his toxic emotions prevented him from being a holy witness for the Lord (Numbers 20:10-13).

Verse 72

¹⁰ Schnabel, 399.

¹¹ Robertson, 390.

¹² Robertson, 390.

¹³ Schnabel, 390.

¹⁴ Schnabel, 391.

¹⁵ Schnabel, 390.

The scene surrounding Peter's detail came to a sad conclusion in verse 72. Mark said, "Immediately a rooster crowed a second time, and Peter remembered when Jesus had spoken the word to him, 'Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.' And he broke down and wept" (Mark 14:72). The word rendered "remembered" literally meant "to set the mind upon."¹⁶ Mark's reference is to the words of Jesus back in Mark 14:27-30. Peter remembered the Lord's words, but his remembrance was too late. He should have had the practice of the Psalmist, placing his thoughts on God's Word before the time of temptation. In Psalm 119:15, we read, "I will meditate on your precepts and think about your ways." Psalm 119:78 said, "Let the arrogant be put to shame for slandering me with lies; I will meditate on your precepts."

Meditation on God's truth is a spiritual discipline that is often neglected. Thinking upon and remembering scriptural realities is a key to spiritual strength. One has said, "The blessings that flow from a mind fixed on God's truth are greater, higher, and more valuable than anything that this world could possibly offer. Through meditation, a feeble person is turned into one who is confident in God's grace. Meditation awakens the lethargic, energizes the weary, and encourages the depressed."¹⁷ Those who fail to think upon God's Word will experience the bitter grief of Peter. When they finally do think upon what the Lord has said, it may be too late. Though grace and forgiveness are always available, the consequences of sin may remain.

Luke's gospel adds that Jesus looked at Peter immediately before Peter remembered the words of the Lord (Luke 22:61). That detail instructs us concerning the omnipresence of our Lord. He always sees everything we do. There is nowhere we can go to escape His presence (2 Chronicles 16:9; Psalm 139:7-12; Jeremiah 16:17, 32:19; Matthew 10:29-30). The reality that He is always with us should convict us to live worshipfully for Him.

Jesus' look at Peter also evokes thoughts of the final judgment. In Revelation, John depicted our Lord as having fiery eyes prepared to judge the churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 1:14). Those same eyes will one day examine the lives of believers. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul said, "each one's work will become obvious. For the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire; the fire will test the quality of each one's work. If anyone's work that he has built survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will experience loss, but he himself will be saved—but only as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:13-15). The prospect of future judgment by the eyes of Jesus should instill a holy and healthy fear in believers. Each should desire to be found with good works that remain. In the heat of temptation, remembering the eyes of Jesus can help us remain faithful.

Mark tells of the way in which Peter "broke down and wept" after remembering the words of Jesus. The Greek translated "broke down" involved a compound word that literally meant "to throw upon." It painted a picture of one attacking him or herself. Some believe Peter may have beat his chest, or he might have covered his head with his cloak in shame.¹⁸

The apostle's agony demonstrates the emotional pain that always accompanies sin the life of a believer. Yielding to indwelling sin never pans out or pays off. There is a reason the Psalmist said, "The sorrows of those who take another god for themselves will multiply" (Psalm 16:4). Believers should often reflect on the agony that comes with spiritual rebellion. One has rightly said, "Sin is sure to lead to sorrow, and that the way of most holiness is always the way of most happiness."¹⁹

We also see in Peter's response a picture of godly repentance (2 Corinthians 7:7-12). As opposed to worldly repentance (Matthew 27:3-5), godly repentance leads to confession

¹⁶ Robertson, 390.

¹⁷ Saxton, David W. *God's Battle Plan for the Mind*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 4.

¹⁸ Schnabel, 391.

¹⁹ Ryle, 263-264.

(Psalm 51:4, John 21:15-16), restoration (Psalm 51:8-11, John 21:17-19), and ministering on behalf of Christ (Psalm 51:13, Acts 2:14-41). Peter's emotional breakdown and tears were not the shenanigans commonly associated with man-centered grief. Though he did not fully understand how to be restored, he was truly convicted over his sin. His remorse would result in renewal (John 21:15-23).

Peter's experience is an example for modern believers. When one transgresses, one must know how to seek after repentance and restoration. Modern believers should remember that we all stumble in many ways (James 3:2). None should believe he or she is immune to sin (1 John 1:8 and 10). When one fails, he or she should seek cleansing through the blood of Jesus. John encouraged first-century believers, saying, "If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). Strong believers know where to get restoration and renewal when they fail. Scripture says, "Though a righteous person falls seven times, he will get up, but the wicked will stumble into ruin" (Proverbs 24:16).