

THE GREATEST SINNER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Luke 22:54-62

Doubtless opinions would differ as to who was the greatest sinner in the New Testament. It was not Herod, although he did some terrible things. When he heard that Jesus Christ was born, he issued an order that all the male babies under two years of age, in the vicinity of Bethlehem, be killed. It is extremely difficult for us to imagine the sorrow he caused. In a little home is a couple with a tiny baby whom they loved devotedly. Then some cruel soldiers enter the house, seize the baby, throw it against the wall and dash out its brains. That scene was multiplied many times. Herod was cold and cruel, but he was not the greatest sinner in the New Testament.

Pontius Pilate was not the greatest sinner in the New Testament. He was a weak-kneed politician. He knew that the Lord Jesus was innocent and could have released Him but he had his political ear to the ground, and wanted the favor of the people, so he delivered the Christ to be crucified. Yet, he was not the greatest sinner in the New Testament.

Judas Iscariot was not the greatest sinner in the New Testament. He traveled with the Lord Jesus, but he was never redeemed. His heart was never right with God. He betrayed the Lord Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, then in bitter remorse he went out and committed suicide. Yet, one would not call him the greatest sinner.

Simon Peter was the greatest sinner in the New Testament. Why would one say that? Because his sin was against both light and love. His sin was against the One Who had done more for him than for any other man. His sin was just the opposite of all he professed to be and to do. He was a man very close to the Lord. We don't expect much from a man who is far from Christ, but when a child of God sins grievously, his sin is greater.

There was not anything dull about Simon Peter. Often he was on the mountaintop and often he was in the valley. Sometimes it appeared that he was the greatest saint on earth and at other times he proved to be a most ungrateful sinner. He was always colorful and interesting. It seems that he was more human than any other Bible character. As we read the story of his life we say, "Peter was a man like the rest of us. Our lives, too, are an up-and-down existence."

I. Peter's Conversion.

Peter was a commercial fisherman. He caught fish to sell and make a living and not as a sport. Like many others who worked on the sea, he was a rough and profane man. Peter had a brother, Andrew, who was just his opposite. He was a quiet, retiring sort of fellow.

We do not know much about Andrew, for the New Testament has very little to say about him. He was a man of average ability, and was frequently referred to as Simon Peter's brother. Among Andrew's close friends was John the Baptist. Andrew and John were talking with John the Baptist one day when Christ passed by and the latter said to them, "Behold the lamb of God!" When they looked upon the long-expected Messiah, their hearts leaped within them and they became eager and expectant. Moved by fervid impulse, they instantly left John the Baptist and followed Christ. Andrew had a wonderful experience of grace, came into possession of an indescribable joy, and became an ardent follower of Christ.

Andrew immediately became concerned that his brother, Simon Peter, enter a similar experience and relationship. Andrew went straight home, told Peter about his Christian experience and invited him to come to the Saviour. Andrew brought Simon Peter to Christ and introduced him to Him. The greatest thing that any person can ever do for another is to bring him to the Lord Jesus Christ. When Andrew led his brother to the Lord Jesus, he did not have any idea that one day Peter would preach to a great crowd and see three thousand people saved. You and I never know what usefulness may be in store for someone whom we introduce to Christ.

II. Peter's Call.

After his conversion it is possible that Peter did not see the Lord Jesus for some days, but no doubt he thought much about Him. Peter was a different man from what he was before Christ saved him. Perhaps those who fished with him said, "Have you noticed how different Simon is since he met Jesus? He is not boisterous and profane like he used to be." If you are not different from what you used to be, you do not know Christ. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away: behold, all things are become new" (II Corinthians 5:17).

One day Peter took a day off from fishing in order to mend his nets. As he busied himself about this work, a shadow fell across him and he looked up and saw the Lord Jesus standing there. "And he said unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). Immediately Peter and Andrew left their nets and followed the Lord. This led to hardship and eventually death, but if they had not made the decision to follow Christ, or if they had stuck to their nets, we never would have heard of them.

Today men frequently hesitate when Christ calls. Some of them say, "I am not prepared." Moses said that. But I can testify that God will help you to become prepared if you will make a full surrender to Him. Some say, "Lord I have a family to support." But God will take care of your family if you will take care of His work. Someone else says, "Lord, I have a business to look after." But God calls you to a bigger business, one that pays bigger dividends than any other business on earth.

Be it said to Peter's credit, as he left all and followed Christ. If you are going to be a real Christian, you must leave something and follow Someone, and that Someone is Jesus Christ.

III. Peter's Conduct.

Peter had the glorious privilege of walking with Christ for more than three years. One night when he and the other disciples were in a ship on the sea a mighty storm arose very suddenly. They thought that their ship would sink at any minute. Then suddenly they saw the Lord Jesus walking on the water, coming toward them. They thought at first that He was a ghost, but impulsive Peter cried out, "Lord if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water" (Matthew 14:28). Whoever heard of a man walking on the water? But Christ said, "Come," and Peter stepped out of the boat and walked toward the Saviour.

As long as Peter kept his eyes on Christ he was perfectly safe. But when he took his eyes off the Lord and looked down at the water, he began to sink. As he was going down he offered a short prayer, "Lord, save me" (Matthew 14:30). Then

Christ lifted him up and rescued him. When God's children are in trouble, they do not need to make a long speech to God. Just as Peter began to sink when he took his eyes off the Lord Jesus, we, too, begin to sink when we take our eyes off Him and look at the difficulties around us.

One day the Lord took Peter, James and John with Him to the top of a mountain. There He was transformed and transfigured. God clothed Him with the glory which we shall behold when we see Him in heaven. Moses and Elijah came down from heaven and talked to Christ about the death He would soon die for sinners. The disciples fell upon their faces in fear. Finally, when they looked up, no one was there but Jesus. And Peter was so moved that he said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; here ye him" (Matthew 17:4-5).

IV. Peter's Claim.

When the Lord Jesus told His disciples that His enemies were going to arrest Him and put Him to death, Peter immediately jumped to his feet and in substance said, "No, Lord, no, they can't do that to You. They will have to kill me before they touch You." It's mighty easy for us to talk big when the sun is shining but it's a different matter when a shadow falls across our pathway. "Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice" (Matthew 26:34). It is possible that Peter mumbled, "I'll show Him how strong I am, nothing in the world would cause me to deny Him."

That night the Saviour took Peter, James and John into the garden of Gethsemane. These three went to sleep while the Lord prayed in great agony of spirit. Then, as they left the garden, Judas planted the kiss of betrayal on the cheek of the Lord Jesus and His enemies arrested Him. Where was Peter? Was he standing between Christ and His enemies? No, as the captors of Jesus led Him to the palace of the high priest, Peter followed Him "afar off," that is, timidly in the rear.

When Peter was admitted into the courtyard, he stealthily walked over to the center of the court where the fire was burning, as it was cold there in Jerusalem on that early spring night.

V. Peter's Cursing.

Around this fire were the servants of the household and the soldiers who arrested Jesus. They were laughing and jesting as they warmed themselves. Along with this crowd Peter stood and warmed himself. He then sat down with them in order to see and to hear, and at the same time, he thereby hoped to escape notice. So there he was in a place of compromise like many modern Christians who mingle with the enemies of Christ and seek to hide their identity. It is always a place of peril.

Meanwhile, the girl who kept the gate watched him. As he sat there warming himself, he must have overlooked the light of the fire which was shining on his face. The portress gazed intently at him. Concluding that he was one of the disciples, she said to him, "Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee." This was altogether unexpected to Peter. Surprised and fearful, he stammered, "I neither know nor understand what thou sayest." At this juncture the cock crew.

It was clearly too hot for him by the fire then. He felt the need of fresh air, so he went out into the forecourt or porch. Others joined the girl in saying, "This man also was with Jesus of Nazareth." "And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man." That is the trouble about lying; one lie is certain to call for another to cover up the first one. It was plain to Peter that he was recognized as a follower of Jesus, the very thing he was trying to avoid, and that had led him to deny twice that he had any knowledge of Jesus. About an hour later, he returned to the fire.

Another bystander observed Peter closely and remarked to the crowd: "Of a truth this man also was with Him: for he is a Galilean." Others remarked to Peter, "Of a truth thou also art one of them; for they speech betrayeth thee. Then began he to curse and swear saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew.

VI. Peter's Contribution

Upon hearing the rooster crow, Peter remembered what the Lord Jesus had said. It is even possible that Christ had been standing close enough to hear those terrible oaths of Peter, or that they may have been leading Him by where the Apostle was. At any rate, Christ turned and "looked on Peter," maybe through an open door or window. He did not speak a word, but gave Peter an indescribable look that cut him deeply. There was no need for the Lord to say anything. His penetrating look was sufficient. It reminded Peter of what his Lord had said and of his own rash promises.

That look was a convicting one. A shaft of conviction penetrated the soul of Peter. He could never forget that look. It was a grieved look. The Master was grieved inexpressibly that Peter should treat Him so shamefully. It was also a tender look. That tender and compassionate look of Jesus simply broke Peter's heart. "He went out," that is, left the crowd, who were enemies of Christ, found a quiet place, and "wept bitterly" on account of his sin.

Peter was not the last person to commit such a sin. Christ loved us and has done great and wonderful things for us, yet we have often denied Him. We deny Him by the sins we commit. We deny Him by showing the spirit of Satan instead of the spirit of Christ. We deny Him by putting other things before Him. We deny Him by giving way to our own comfort and convenience and neglecting His church and His work. We deny Him by taking the material things He gives us and using them for ourselves instead of using them for His glory. Yes, we deny Him in many ways. Oh, that we might find some spot where we, too, could weep over the way we have treated the best Friend anybody ever had.

VII. Peter's Consecration.

On the next day the Lord Jesus died on the cross while Peter looked on, a defeated and broken man. Is that the end of the story? No, thank God! The story of God's children does not end in defeat. For three days Peter wept and wondered. Did Christ still love him? Had the Lord forgiven him? Did the Lord Jesus have any future plans for him? On Sunday morning the Lord Jesus rose from the grave. And His first thought was of Peter, to whom He sent a message through the young man at the tomb, namely, "But go your way, tell His disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see Him" (Mark 16:7). He didn't

want Peter to feel left out, so his name was mentioned specifically. How that message must have gladdened Peter's heart!

Sometime later Christ Jesus met the disciples by the seaside at dawn. There He spoke especially to Peter. Three times he had denied the Lord, so three times Christ asked, "Do you love Me, Peter?" And Peter said in substance, "Lord, You know all things. You know my heart. You know how sorry I am that I denied You. You know how miserable I have been. You know I love You." And the Lord Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." In other words, preach My gospel, tell men what I have done for them and serve Me until you die."

Did Peter do that? He certainly did. Fifty days later a great crowd gathered in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit came in power upon Peter and the other disciples. Peter preached a great sermon and three thousand souls were saved, baptized and added to the church. After that, filled with a great love for Christ and a burning missionary zeal, Peter went out to preach and witness and suffer for Christ. Unflinchingly, and alone, Peter faced death. He considered it an honor to die on the cross as a Christian martyr. However, tradition tells us that when they were going to crucify him that he was so humble that he said, "I am not worthy to be crucified as my Lord was, let me be crucified head downward." The man who sinned so greatly against love, loved his Saviour enough to give his life for Him.

Yes, Peter sinned against love even though he was a child of God. Haven't we often done the same thing? Haven't we often displeased the Saviour Who died for us? Yes, but as Christ loved Peter and forgave him and transformed him so will He will do the same for us. Let us come to Him confessing our sins and turn away from them. Then we shall hear His sweet voice say, "I forgive you, go and do better now."