

THE FALL OF SIMON PETER

"But Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest's palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end." Matthew 26:58.

Few narratives in the gospel record are more imbued with practical instruction than the one which relates the fall and restoration of Simon Peter. This story has many things to say to us about the danger of temptations, and especially those which come to us in unexpected forms. As we center our thoughts around the fall of Simon Peter, let us consider:

I. The Circumstances Of His Fall.

The last night of the earthly life of the Lord Jesus had come. Judas closed his bargain. He betrayed the Master with a kiss. Immediately, Christ was arrested by the soldiers. All of His disciples forsook Him and fled in a panic. But with Peter and John the panic did not last very long. At least they wanted to watch developments. So, they soon turned in their flight and followed Him. As the captors of Christ Jesus led Him to the palace of the high priest, Peter followed Him afar off, that is, timidly in the rear.

There are different ways of following Christ, you know. One may follow Him in closest intimacy. It is possible to follow Him so as to be continuously conscious of His presence. A Christian may follow Him so as to bring joy to His heart, as well as abiding courage and blessing to his own. One may also follow Him half-heartedly, fearfully or distantly. It was that way with Peter. He was still a disciple, but he was not walking in the bracing intimacy of his Master's presence. He was a distant disciple, following Him afar off.

It seems that John was acquainted with the high priest, so, when they arrived at his palace, he was readily admitted. But Peter, forsaken for once by his native boldness, remained standing without. When John saw that Peter had not entered, he went out, and through his influence with the portress at the gate, he easily obtained admission into the courtyard for Simon Peter. Once inside, Peter was left to look out for himself, and John hurried back into the room where the trial of Christ was in progress, in order that he might be at his Master's side.

Peter 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. 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 know not what thou sayest."

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. Another 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 Christ, 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 thy speech bewrayeth thee. Then began he to curse and swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew."

Christ may have been standing close enough to hear those terrible words of Peter. At any rate, He turned and "looked on Peter," maybe through an open door or window. He did not speak a word, but gave him an indescribable look that cut him deeply. There was no need for Jesus to say anything. His piercing look was sufficient. It forcibly reminded Peter of what Christ had said and of his own rash promises. He could stand it no longer in the court by the fire with the mockers and scorners. Neither could he face his Master after that look. So he went outside and "burst into tears."

1. It was a convicting look.
That look was a shaft of conviction that penetrated the soul of Peter. He could never forget that look.
2. It was a grieved look.
The Master was grieved inexpressibly that Peter should treat Him so shamefully.
3. It was a painful look.
This shameful act of Peter caused Christ great pain and suffering.
4. It was a tender look.
That tender and compassionate look of the Lord Jesus simply broke Peter's heart.

Two things impress us here, namely, "he went out," that is, left the crowd who were enemies of Christ, and "he wept bitterly."

II. The Causes Of His Fall.

From one point of view Peter's fall was sudden, unexpected and startling. And yet it was not so sudden as it seemed. Backsliding is never a matter of a moment, but it is always a gradual declension or process. Peter's fall had a history. He never sat down and deliberately decided that he would be a half-hearted, useless disciple, following Christ afar off. There were various things that led to his fall. Among them were the following:

1. Self-confidence.
Peter had the utmost confidence in his own strength. He had a feeling of superiority. His confidence in his own strength was the beginning of his aberration, and the cause of his subsequent sorrow. He felt that he was a great man and could do almost anything. Knowing his weakness, Christ proceeded to warn Peter. He said, "All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad." Matthew 26:31. Rather indignantly Peter replied, "Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended."

Self-confidence and self-sufficiency never bring people close to the Lord. People do not come close to Him except through a sense of need. God cannot help those who do not desire His help. If you feel that you can conquer in your own strength, then that is all the strength you will have. There never comes a time when a Christian cannot fall. Paul said, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." I Corinthians 10:12.

2. Boastfulness.
Peter was absolutely sure of himself. When Christ told him that "before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice," Peter boasted that under no circumstances would he ever deny Christ, even if he should die with Him. He said, "If I should

die with thee, I will not deny thee in any wise." He even avowed himself ready to lay down his life for Christ's sake (John 13:37).

3. Blindness to danger.

Peter was forewarned of danger, but he never dreamed that any was near. Not foreseeing any danger, he thought that the warning was needless, so he went forth in his own strength. He simply thrust himself into the danger zone.

4. Neglect of communion with Christ.

Backsliding always begins with the neglect of prayer. If one is to avoid backsliding, he must keep open the lines of communication with Christ. There was an endless store of power laid up for Peter in Christ. As long as he remained in close touch with Christ, the apostle was brave enough for anything. Having allowed himself to be separated from the Lord and trusting in his own strength, Peter went down before the taunt of a servant girl. He would have been equal to any and every emergency had he kept in vital and loving touch with Christ.

No doubt the world is full of Christians who are out of communion with Christ. They were formerly peaceful and prosperous in spiritual things, but are not so now. Something has gone wrong with them. Things have not turned out as they expected, and in their disappointment, they have turned away from Christ. Being out of communion with Him has taken the look of joy from their faces, peace from their hearts, and power from their lives.

In addition to being out of communion with Christ, he was out of fellowship with the Christians. He had separated himself from James, John, Andrew, Philip and the rest. They had not done to suit him. Some people will not be faithful in church attendance because the church will not do their way, employ their weapons and adopt their methods. They stay away from the church, or if they attend they act as if they were out of it—they refuse to support it, they criticize it and condemn it. Peter was out of fellowship with Christians because he was out of communion with Christ. The person who follows Christ afar off soon finds fault with his brethren. Ere long he goes out from them or he comes back close to Christ.

5. Bad associates.

When a Christian gets out of communion with Christ and out of fellowship with Christians, he immediately gets into bad company. Following Christ afar off, Peter was soon in the midst of evil companions. He warmed himself by the fire of the enemy. His faith began to weaken as soon as he went among the enemies of the Master. One cannot be faithful to Christ and consort with evil companions. Bad company was a big factor in Peter's downfall. Multitudes fail and fall simply because they go with the wrong crowd. "Enter not into the path of the wicked, and walk not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it; turn from it and pass on."

6. Lack of courage.

(1) Peter could not stand sneers.

When the maid said, "Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee," with something of a sneer upon her lip, Peter quailed before her face and denied before them all, saying, "I know not what thou sayest." It is strange that people are so afraid of sneers; that they are so easily frightened lest someone should make fun of them.

(2) He was afraid of criticism.

Being afraid of what somebody might say, he followed the path of least resistance and did what he thought was the easiest at the time.

(3) He dreaded persecution.

He was in the company of those who were hostile to Christ, but he did not resent

their hostility. He heard Him falsely accused, but he did not utter a word in His defense. He never rebuked a single ruffian who insulted Christ. He did not side with his Lord because he feared death in the event that he should own Him.

Peter thought that he could save himself from persecution and martyrdom through falsehood. He repeated the falsehood a second and a third time. For emphasis, he indulged in profanity, which is not only absolutely forbidden because it is a sin against God but is also a mark of the lack of intelligence. Any person who cannot express his thoughts without the use of profanity is woefully ignorant or certainly has a very limited vocabulary.

III. The Cure For His Fall.

1. He saw his mistake.

Some never do. They deny Christ in word or deed, or in both, and yet they do not see their mistake. Often they attempt to defend their actions.

2. He was sorry for his sin.

When Jesus looked at him, His look was so full of pity and yearning that Peter thought of how terribly he had sinned. Being deeply humbled and heartbroken, he wept with bitter sorrow.

3. He repented of his sin.

He not only thought of what he had done, but he wept bitter tears of repentance. Repentance always precedes restoration and is the only promise of it. It is the only course to pursue when one has done wrong. Truly, Peter was a great sinner. But there is a greater fact in his life than his sin and that is his penitence, which is much less known. All are with him in his sin, but not all are with him in his penitence.

4. He was transformed.

(1) He was humble.

He sincerely felt that he had wounded his Redeemer and his own soul too deeply to turn again to folly.

(2) He was compassionate toward others.

Thereafter, he labored with faithful tenderness to win to Christ his erring kindred and fellow-citizens, and to help his humble brethren in Christ to grow in the grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

(3) He lived close to Christ.

This is the only life of satisfaction and success.

(4) He was zealous for Christ's glory.

He became increasingly faithful to the cause of Christ and spent the remainder of his days in zealously propagating the Christian faith.

(5) He was courageous in the hour of death.

Unflinchingly, and alone, he faced death. He considered it an honor to die on the cross as a Christian martyr. However, tradition tells us that he was so humble and considered himself so unworthy that he asked to be crucified head downward instead of being crucified like his Lord.

In the story of Peter's fall and restoration there is a message for us that is rich in hope. It tells us in the most emphatic way that the person who followed afar off yesterday may enter into the intimacy of Christ's fellowship today. There is a place at His side for all who have followed afar off. And it is a place of safety, satisfaction, service and success. Won't you take your place close to Him?