

FOLLOWING AFAR OFF

"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 Jesus led Him to the palace of the high priest, Peter followed Him afar off, that is, timidly in the rear. It seems that John was acquainted with the high priest, and on that account, easily entered with the rest into the palace. 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 who kept the gate, he easily obtained admission for Simon Peter into the courtyard. Once inside, Peter was left to look out for himself, and John hurried back into the room where the trial of Jesus was going on 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 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 thy speech bewrayeth thee. Then began he to curse and swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew."

Jesus 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 Jesus 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 grieving look.
The Master was grieved inexpressibly that Peter should treat Him so shamefully.
3. It was a painful look.
It caused Jesus great suffering. Yes, this shameful act of Peter caused Jesus great pain.
4. It was a tender look.
That tender and compassionate look of 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 his 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. Peter's fall had a history. Many things led up to it. Among them were the following: --

1. His self-confidence.

He had the utmost confidence in his own strength. He had a feeling of superiority to other men. Peter insisted that all men might forsake Him but he never would. Was Peter a hypocrite in saying that? No! He meant every word of it. The trouble with Peter was that he did not know himself. He did not know the power of the devil, and the fiery darts that would be hurled at him. He did not know the power of temptation. Peter felt he was equal to the occasion, but he was sadly mistaken.

2. His boastfulness.

He boasted that under no circumstances would he ever deny Jesus, even if he should die with Him.

3. His blindness to danger.

Although he was forewarned of his danger, he thought the warning was needless, and he never dreamed that danger was so near.

4. His neglect of communion with Christ.

Backsliding always begins with neglect of prayer. If one is to avoid backsliding, he must keep open the lines of communication with Christ. We know that the efficiency of an army depends absolutely on keeping open its lines of communication. If those lines get broken and the army at the front cannot receive supplies of food and ammunition, the only prospect is starvation or surrender. Now, Peter had allowed

himself to be cut off from his base of supply, which base was Jesus Christ. There was endless store of strength and power laid up for him in Christ. When in intimate touch with Him, Peter was brave enough for anything, allowed himself to be separated from his Lord and trusting in his own strength, he 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.

5. His bad associates.

Following Christ afar off, he 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 his 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. His lack of courage.

(1) He could not stand sneers.

The very moment that 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 men are so much 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 Jesus, but he did not resent their hostility. He heard Jesus falsely accused, but he did not utter a word in His defense. He never rebuked a single ruffian who insulted Jesus. He did not side with his Lord because he feared death in the event that he should own Him. He 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 a much less known fact. 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, 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 Jesus.

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 Jesus.

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 alongside Him?