

## 36. The Three-Time Denial of Peter

John 18:15-27

The Gospel According to John

### The Process of Transformation

<sup>18</sup>As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup>“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” <sup>20</sup>At once they left their nets and followed him (Matthew 4:18-20).

If I were to ask you what Jesus meant by the above words, you would probably say that Jesus was calling two fishermen, Simon and Andrew, to catch men instead of fish, and you would be right. However, there are four words in that statement that capture what Jesus does with all dedicated followers of Christ. These are the words: “I will make you.” His appeal to the fishermen was to come to Him, follow Him, and in the process of following Him, He would work in their lives to make them fishers of men. I want to look closer at these four words and what they mean to us as followers of Jesus.

If I asked you what you make in your work, for example, if you were an artist, you would probably respond by saying that you were in the business of making paintings. If you were a baker, you might respond by saying that you make bread. All of us are making something with our lives. I am in the business of speaking and writing in the hope that I am a tool in the Lord’s hand to make disciples. What Christ does is to make transformed, empowered disciples. Disciples are learners and followers, people who have abandoned their old lives to follow Christ and live their lives in submission to Him and His kingdom purposes.

Let’s look at another Scripture that will help us understand what God is doing in our lives:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29).

If life is just about finding Christ, why doesn’t He take us home when we come to Him and are born-again of the Holy Spirit? Is there something more to life than just finding Christ?

Over the many years I have served our Savior, I have formed an opinion that, after we come to Christ and begin following Him, the Lord uses the rest of our lives to transform us from the inside to make us more like Jesus. Paul talks about this process as something that starts slowly and increases with time as we are consistently obedient to the Spirit of God:

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The Greek word *metamorphoō* is the word translated into our English word “transformed.” It means “a change of place, condition, or form; to transform, transmute, to alter fundamentally.

The word is used of spiritual transformation, and it is an invisible process in Christians. This change takes place during our lives in this age.”<sup>1</sup> John, the Apostle, also speaks of this change that God is bringing about within us:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

J.R. Miller wrote, “The only thing that walks back from the tomb with the mourners and refuses to be buried is the character of a man. What a man is, survives him. It can never be buried.”<sup>2</sup> Henry Ward Beecher put it this way: "Happiness is not the end of life; character is." Once we become Christians, God is at work in our lives to make us into people of character, and our character is measured by our responses to life's trials and difficulties. Thomas Chalmers also wrote about character this way: "The character wherewith we sink into the grave at death is the very character wherewith we shall appear at the resurrection."

Over the years since my call to give myself entirely to the work of God, I have trained and helped many leaders into full time and lay leadership. The bigger the church, the more leaders are needed to be called, taught, and equipped. I have found that people do not consider themselves to be leaders, and it comes as a shock to them when I have asked them to be a group leader. When I look for leaders, the first thing for which I seek is love toward God and love toward people. Most everything else can be taught. I also want to see that a person can take risks and that he or she has an outward focused heart. However, the questions before us today are how does God make us into men and women of God, and how can we cooperate with Him? How does God shape people's character and prepare them for eternity? Our passage in the book of John about Peter will help us to see how God works.

### **The Transformation of Peter**

When Christ called Simon Peter, He saw that he had that raw leadership gifting in his spiritual DNA. Peter would take risks, while others would not. He courageously got out of the boat and walked on water at Jesus' command (Matthew 14:30). He showed his courage when he attacked the high priest's servant Malchus in Gethsemane to try to keep Jesus from being captured (John 18:10). We also saw his obedience toward Christ when Jesus told him to push his boat out into deep water for a catch of fish. He did so even though he believed it was impossible because they did not catch fish during the day in the Sea of Galilee. The fish were caught at night when the net wasn't seen by the fish (Luke 5:4).

### **What character qualities or traits in a leader help you to trust them?**

Although Peter often showed great faith and was not afraid to risk, other characteristics had to be refined if Peter was ever to be the man that God needed as a pillar of the New Testament church. There were big plans ahead for Peter, and the Lord had to work in his life to make him

<sup>1</sup> *Key Word Study Bible*. AMG Publishers, 3565 *Metamorphoō*, page 1651.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in *Twelve Ordinary Men*. John MacArthur, page 47. W Publishing Group.

fit for the task ahead. The flaws that hindered Peter's spiritual growth were his lack of humility and his arrogance, demonstrated by his rash and impulsive words and actions. Peter was likely the one that instigated the dispute that occurred at the Last Supper as to who was the greatest. "Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered the greatest" (Luke 22:24). Maybe, Peter was upset because Judas managed to gain one of the seats of honor alongside Jesus at the table. Certainly, Judas was near enough for Jesus to hand him a piece of bread (John 13:26), so he was likely seated to the left of the Master. Right after this dispute at the Last Supper table, Jesus told Peter that the enemy would shake his faith:

<sup>31</sup>"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. <sup>32</sup>But I have prayed for you, Simon that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." <sup>33</sup>But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." <sup>34</sup>Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me" (Luke 22:31-34).

These words are difficult to read. It tells us that Satan demanded (the word *asked* in the original Greek is very forceful) to separate the wheat from the chaff among the disciples (the word *you* in verse 31 is in the plural) in a spiritual sifting process. Satan saw Peter as chaff and asked Christ for permission to "fling him on the rubbish heap" as this is what happened to chaff. Because of Christ's desire to use Peter, He allowed Satan to challenge Peter's faith.

What was the Lord's purpose by allowing this test? Peter needed to be broken for him to see his character flaws. The test would demonstrate of what Peter was made when the other disciples were not looking. D.L. Moody once said, "Character is what a man is in the dark." Is it possible that God designs these kinds of tests to reveal and refine our character? Would He go to all that trouble? We had an example in the life of Job when Satan had asked for permission to test God's servant (Job 1:9-12). We also have an example of this in Israel's history as a nation.

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands (Deuteronomy 8:2).

God led the people of Israel for forty years in the desert to humble them and test them. Let me ask you a question. Does God know what was in their hearts, and yours, and my heart, too? Of course, He does! So, is the test for His benefit or mine? The God of heaven wants us to see ourselves the way He sees us. Only when we see our actual state will we cooperate with Him to overcome our sin nature and walk closely with Him. The test is designed by God to show us something about ourselves that we do not see up to the point of the test.

Can you think of a life-changing event that happened to you? What changes came about in your character as a result?

Spiritual transformation is not something we do, but something that God does in us by the power of His Holy Spirit. The first step is a revelation of Christ. God also reveals to us our hearts. Take the Apostle Peter, for example. When Peter heard Christ's prophetic warning about being sifted by Satan, he responded in his usual rash fashion, saying that he was ready to go to prison and

even to his death for Christ. Peter was not aware of his spiritual weaknesses and flaws. There was no talking to Peter about this. He refused to believe Christ's prophetic words by self-confidently affirming that he had the strength of character to follow all the way. He was so sure of himself.

### **The Testing of Peter's Faith**

With that introduction in mind, let us now read our passage in John and see how God broke the heart of Peter and allowed him to see his character flaws:

<sup>15</sup>Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, <sup>16</sup>but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in. <sup>17</sup>"You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" she asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." <sup>18</sup>It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself (John 18:15-18).

It was probably after midnight when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Matthew writes that Peter was careful to follow Jesus and the soldiers at a distance: "But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome" (Matthew 26:47). The distance was approximately a mile from Gethsemane to the palace complex of Annas and Caiaphas. John wrote that Jesus was led first to the house of Annas (John 18:16). This large enclosure of buildings with a courtyard in the midst likely housed both Annas and Caiaphas, who are both named High Priests in the New Testament.

To hold the office of High Priest of Israel was similar to being the king of the nation at that time. Annas was High Priest from A.D. 6-15 and was succeeded by his son-in-law Caiaphas, who held office until A.D. 36/37. The Old Testament decreed that the office of the High Priest was for the life of the man (Numbers 35:25), so Annas was the real power at the head of the corrupt priesthood. His son-in-law Caiaphas was put in power by the Roman procurator Gratus, the man in charge before Pontius Pilate.

[What do you think was going through Peter's mind as he followed at a distance?](#)

He may have wondered why Christ allowed the Roman soldiers to arrest Him, especially after Jesus had put this detachment of around six hundred on the ground with His words "I Am." His heart must have sunk when he saw Jesus taken to the High Priest's household, especially after he had attacked the High Priest's servant with a sword and cut off his ear. He may have been fearful of death at the hand of the soldiers. In his narrative, John tells us of a disciple that was known to the High Priest who was allowed to enter through the gate. All evidence of who this disciple pointed to the person of John himself.

How could the High Priest and his staff know a fisherman? Some say that because John's father, Zebedee, had a business on the Sea of Galilee with many servants working with his sons on the boats. (See Mark 1:20). It is possible that Zebedee supplied the high priest's household with

salted fish from Galilee and that John the Apostle brought the fish down to Jerusalem. Only John records the name of Malchus, the one who lost his ear to the sword of Peter. Malchus was one of the high priest's servants.

### **The First Denial of Peter**

<sup>15</sup>Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, <sup>16</sup>but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in. <sup>17</sup>"You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." <sup>18</sup>It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself (John 18:15-18).

It was the Apostle John who first gained entrance through the gate and then went and asked permission for Peter also to be allowed into the courtyard. While Peter waited at the gate outside, we can imagine his heart racing, for he knew that some of the soldiers might recognize him, maybe even Malchus, whom he had recently physically assaulted. What was Peter hoping to accomplish by being there? I think he was trying to be brave and stay with his Master.

In his narrative, John contrasts the difference between the Lord Jesus' bravery and the wavering Peter, i.e., the courage of Christ before Annas and the failing Peter before a lowly servant girl. As Peter was let in through the gate, notice how the enemy used the woman at the gateway to pose a question in the negative, thus making it easy to answer with "I am not." Satan's temptations are always so easy to accept, and they lead us down a path into more significant and deceitful sin, thus making it harder and harder to speak the truth.

What reduced the Apostle Peter to deny being a disciple in front of a servant girl? Could it be that this first denial of Peter was because he was afraid the young girl would call the soldiers and now the door or gate was locked behind him, thus preventing his easy escape? We cannot tell what fears were in his mind at that moment. Where was John? Perhaps, he was listening to the questioning of Jesus by Annas. Luke tells us that Peter sat down with a group of people warming themselves by a fire after the first denial (Luke 22:55). The young girl did not believe Peter's first denial and came up close to see his face in the light of the fire.

### **The Second Denial**

It seems that the second denial took place before several people as Peter sat with his enemies around the fire:

<sup>69</sup>Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. <sup>70</sup>But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said (Matthew 26:69-70).

Once he was in the courtyard, there was nowhere else to go but sit with the enemies of the Lord who were warming themselves at a charcoal fire. In the original Greek text, John made a

distinction of the kind of fire in the courtyard. It was a charcoal fire. Interestingly, after Christ's resurrection, Peter was restored to his apostleship by Jesus at a charcoal fire on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee when Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him (John 21:9). John is keen to note symbolic details, such as this in his Gospel. Peter's denial to those around the fire constituted his second denial. This is the way temptation often comes to us. We give the enemy an inch, and he takes a foot; give him a foot, and he takes a yard; give a yard, and he takes a mile. We must be aware not to compromise an inch of our lives to the enemy of our souls. There is nothing to tell us that the household servants would have done anything to Peter; he was reduced to his denials out of fear.

While this occurred in the courtyard, John takes us to the scene before Annas, who is trying to get information out of Jesus to use in the real court hearing before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the seventy elders, set to take place in the early morning. Brutality and injustice were illegal in all court appearances, but that did not stop Annas and his men:

<sup>19</sup>Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. <sup>20</sup>“I have spoken openly to the world,” Jesus replied. “I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. <sup>21</sup>Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.” <sup>22</sup>When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. “Is this the way you answer the high priest?” he demanded. <sup>23</sup>“If I said something wrong,” Jesus replied, “testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?” <sup>24</sup>Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest (John 18:19-24).

Jesus was hit about the face because He would not be intimidated in giving information about His disciples or His teaching. Annas was looking for any information that would incriminate Christ before Pilate, but Jesus was objecting to the line of questioning because of its illegality and to establish for the record His innocence and the High Priest and Elders' corruption. When Jesus refused to give Annas any evidence, Annas sent him over the courtyard to Caiaphas, who was getting ready the Sanhedrin, the leadership council, for the criminal court proceedings (John 18:24).

### **The Third Denial of Peter**

The third denial of Peter happened at the very time Jesus was led out of the house of Annas on His way to Caiaphas. At the time of the third and last denial, the group had a witness that made Peter completely lose his composure, for John tells us:

<sup>25</sup>Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So they asked him, “You aren't one of his disciples too, are you?” He denied it, saying, “I am not.” <sup>26</sup>One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, “Didn't I see you with him in the garden?” <sup>27</sup>Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow (John 18:25-27).

The pressure of the witness together with a few of the servants around him made him call down curses on himself, wishing himself a violent death at God's hand if he were lying about knowing Jesus:

<sup>73</sup>After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." <sup>74</sup>**Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them,** "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. <sup>75</sup>Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly (Matthew 26:73-75).

After the second denial by the fire, Luke wrote that the third denial was an hour later from the second (v. 59). While under pressure from the relative of Malchus, he started to panic when confronted by an accusation of his Galilean accent, giving him away. Just as Peter confessed not to know Jesus, the cock crowed. He remembered the words of Jesus at the same moment the Lord was led over the courtyard to Caiaphas. Jesus and Peter's eyes connected:

<sup>59</sup>About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." <sup>60</sup>Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" **Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed.** <sup>61</sup>**The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.** Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." <sup>62</sup>And he went outside and **wept bitterly** (Luke 22:59-62).

How painful it was for Peter to be reminded of Jesus' words that, before the cock crowed, he would deny his Lord three times. I don't think there was any accusation in Jesus' eyes, only sadness for Peter. The Greek word translated "looked" is *emblepo*, which describes a fixed look, almost a stare. This look broke Peter's heart; he went outside and wept bitterly. The Greek word translated as *bitterly* means to have violent, uncontrolled, convulsive sobs. His head was bowed, and his shoulders were heaving as the shame of the moment gripped his heart.

Scripture records in detail Peter's denial as well as his immediate repentance. Peter was broken and undone, but we also see his quick repentance. How many of us have fallen and denied our Lord? We may not have done so with our lips in the way Peter did, but I am sure that, at one time or another, we have denied Him with our actions. This passage is recorded for us so that we may have an example of God's mercy and complete forgiveness. The Lord often allows us to experience pain, for it is an excellent teacher.

What do you think God is teaching you through your own life experiences at this present time? Do you know what the lessons are yet?

### **The Place of Brokenness**

Frequently, it is when our actions bring such pain that we hit rock bottom. It is then that we are broken of pride and self-adequacy and look to the Rock, our Savior. Repentance and brokenness is a good place in which to be. While we have adequate resources to fight our own battles, the

Lord lets us carry on. When we are poor and broken in spirit is when we begin to look beyond ourselves to God's mercy and grace. That is the point at which the Lord steps in to fight our battles for us. When we are weak, then we are strong in the Lord: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:17).

The place of our brokenness is the place where God can step in to save, heal, and restore us. God allows such tests and trials in our lives, for He is shaping us spiritually for an eternity with Him. God's school of training is more than Bible college and more than head knowledge. His training often includes brokenness and a contrite heart. Since my conversion to Christ in 1977, I have learned that God uses our life experiences as a school to teach us and prepare us for eternity. He shapes our character through everyday situations. Some of them can be very trying: the death of a family member, a long period of waiting for something promised, a financial need, a sick child—the list is endless. When the right time comes, and the work of God is done, then He has compassion on His servants when he sees that *their* strength is gone and that they have no reserves, no hidden back up plan – just God (Deuteronomy 32:36).

In Chapter 18 of the book of Jeremiah, the Lord told the prophet to go down to the potter's house and that He would give him a message. Jeremiah saw the potter making a jar of clay. The pot was all bent out of shape and had neither beauty nor the correct shape for it to be used. The potter took it off the wheel and started again with the pliable clay to form it into what he wanted to create. The lesson that God taught Jeremiah, Israel, and us as well is that, through our brokenness, God reshapes and transforms us. The writer, A.W. Tozer, once said, "God never uses a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply." Of course, God's desire is never to hurt but to heal, restore, and transform us on the inside, i.e., something that is not easy on our flesh.

What tests are you going through at the moment, and how can others in your small group pray for you?

What the Lord needs in His making of a man or woman of God is a broken and contrite heart. What do I mean by brokenness? Brokenness is the working of God in a person's life, leading to the point of abandonment of one's self-life to a place of complete dependence and trust in the Father's care. John Collinson, an English Vicar, puts it this way:

When to do the will of God means that even my Christian brothers will not understand and I remember that even His brothers did not understand or believe in Him, and I bow my head to obey and accept the misunderstanding, this is brokenness. When I am misrepresented, or deliberately misinterpreted, and I remember that Jesus was falsely accused, but He held his peace, and I accept the accusation without trying to justify myself, that is brokenness. When another is preferred before me, and I am deliberately passed over, and I remember that they cried "away with this man and release unto us Barabbas," and I bow my head and accept rejection, that is brokenness. When my plans are brushed aside, and I see the work of years brought to ruins by the ambitions of others

and I remember that Jesus allowed them to lead Him away to crucify Him, and I bow my head and accept the injustice without bitterness, that is brokenness.

When in order to be right with my God it is necessary to take the humbling path of confession and restitution, and I remember that Jesus made Himself of no reputation and humbled Himself to death, even the death of the cross, and I bow my head, and I'm ready to take the shame of exposure, that is brokenness. When others take unfair advantage of me because I'm a Christian and treat my belongings as public property and I remember that they stripped Him and parted His garments casting lots, and I bow my head and accept the spoiling of my goods joyfully for His sake, this is brokenness. When one acts toward me in an unforgivable way, and I remember when He was crucified, He prayed "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" and I bow my head and accept any behavior towards me as permitted by my heavenly father, this is brokenness. When people expect the impossible of me, and more than time and human strength can give, and I remember that Jesus said "this is my body which is broken for you" and I repent of my self-indulgence and lack of self-giving for others, this is brokenness.

Prayer: Father, we remember the great man of God that Peter became through his trials and how You were able to use him significantly, despite his shortcomings. Would You continue to work in each of us and shape us like clay, so that we may be more like You and accomplish the things You have prepared for us?

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