

Peter's Denial

A Sermon by the Patrick A. Rose

And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So Peter went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:61-62).

Simon had once been a fisherman. He had earned his living casting his nets into the Sea of Galilee. But then he met a man called Jesus. It is recorded in the Word that while Simon was on the shore, washing his nets, the Lord came and got into his boat and asked him to pull away from the shore a short distance. From there the Lord taught the people gathered on the shore—the people who had followed Him. And then He asked Simon to take the boat farther out and to lower his nets into the water. Simon had been fishing all night and had caught nothing, but he did what the Lord said. And he caught so many fish that his net broke. He signaled for help from his partners, James and John, in another boat. And soon both boats were filled with so many fish that they were on the verge of sinking.

Simon was astonished. He fell down at the knees of Jesus, and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:8) But the Lord told him not to be afraid. "Do not be afraid," He said, "From now on you will catch men" (Luke 5:10). And so it was that, after they returned to shore, Simon, together with James and John, left behind their boats, and their nets, and their lives on the Sea of Galilee, and followed the Lord.

Simon thus became the first of the Lord's disciples. And he followed the Lord throughout His ministry. With the exception of those times when the Lord went off by Himself to be alone, Simon was almost constantly at the Lord's side.

Simon was a man of contradictions. He was capable of great insight and great courage. But he could also be a stupid man, and one without a backbone. It was Simon who first recognized who the Lord really was. He said to the Lord that He was the Christ. And for this reason the Lord gave him a special name. He was called *Petros*, or Peter, by the Lord, a Greek name that means a rock, or stone. Yet at another time, Simon Peter was not a rock at all, but a coward. On the night of the Lord's arrest, Peter had promised the Lord that he would follow Him, even if it meant prison...even if it meant death. But the Lord told Peter that before dawn, before the cock crowed, he would have denied Him three times.

And this is exactly what happened. After the Lord was arrested, Peter was scared—scared that he also would be arrested by the temple guards. As the Lord was taken by the soldiers to the house of the high priest, Peter followed from a distance. He melted into the crowd that had gathered. But a young woman recognized him and accused him of being one of the Lord's followers. Peter denied it. Twice more Peter was recognized and accused of being a follower of the Lord. Twice more he denied the accusation. And then the Lord turned and looked over toward Peter. And Peter then remembered what the Lord had told him—how he would deny the Lord three times that night. It is said that Peter then went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:62).

Just imagine the shame in Peter's heart as the Lord looked over toward him. Imagine the grief that filled his mind when he realized that he had just denied three times that he had even known the Lord. Here was the same man who, out on the Sea of Galilee, had fallen down at the Lord's knees and become the very first of His disciples. Now he had forsaken the Lord.

Peter was deeply saddened by his own cowardice. He wept bitterly. He deeply regretted his actions, and, on the first Easter morning, after the women had seen the angel, he would be the first to run to the sepulcher. Later, after the Lord ascended to heaven, Peter would become a strong and fearless preacher of the Gospel, bravely facing both prison and, ultimately, death, for the sake of Christianity. Peter, the individual man, clearly showed by his actions that he had repented of his dismal act of cowardice that dark night when the Lord had been arrested.

Nevertheless his denial of the Lord is recorded forever in the pages of Scripture, recorded because this denial of the Lord symbolizes the death of His church. Peter's cowardly act serves, in the spiritual sense, as a grave warning. We must not deny the Lord in our hearts, for if we do, we destroy within ourselves everything that is spiritual, everything that belongs to His church.

There is something so familiar about Peter. Peter acknowledged the Lord's Divinity, and then, immediately afterwards, contradicted the Lord. Peter was the disciple who trusted the Lord enough to walk toward Him on the water, but then doubted the Lord and began to sink. Peter said that he would follow the Lord whatever happened. Yet that same night he denied the Lord three times. Peter is so much like us. At times we can be so strong, or think that we are strong. At other times, though, we are so weak. Now, it is no coincidence that we recognize something of ourselves in Peter. The Lord, when He began His ministry, called twelve men to be His disciples. And He did this in order that these men might represent His church. "By the twelve apostles," we read, "are represented and signified all in the church who are in truths from good; consequently, all truths from good, from which is the church" (*Apocalypse Explained* 8:2; cf. *Apocalypse Explained* 820:1). Each of the disciples, then, represented a particular aspect of the church, something necessary for the growth of the church in a person's heart and mind. And the Lord, in choosing these twelve disciples, chose men whose very personalities would reflect the spiritual qualities they represented (*Spiritual Experiences* 1217).

Simon the fisherman was chosen by the Lord to represent, specifically, the faith of a person of the church. Simon was a man who could be very perceptive, but who also had a marked tendency to vacillate. He was sometimes strong, and sometimes weak. And such is the nature of faith. A person's faith can be strong. It can also be very weak indeed.

Faith is fundamental to the very existence of the church. Faith has to do with truth, and with that spiritual vision which truth makes possible. Without truth, without a vision, without faith, a person would know nothing about the spiritual world, nothing about heaven, nothing about the way to heaven, and nothing about the Lord (*Apocalypse Explained* 820:2). Without truth, there would be no church. As we read in *Apocalypse Explained*: "truth is the first thing through which a person has the church" (820:2). And so it was that Simon, in representing faith, was the very first disciple to be chosen by the Lord. Furthermore, because faith continues to play a prominent role in the development of the church, so Simon plays a prominent role among the Lord's

disciples. We read about Simon Peter many times throughout the New Testament, and everywhere we read about him, the subject treated of in the internal sense has to do with faith.

Now what is it about faith that makes it to be so vacillating and weak? It is because there are, in fact, two very different kinds of faith. Sometimes Peter represents faith from charity—faith that is actually lived. At other times he represents faith alone—faith that is thought about, but is not actually applied to life. And these two kinds of faith, though they might appear similar on the surface, are as different as day and night. One kind of faith is exceedingly powerful. The other is completely weak and ineffective. And when a person's faith vacillates, what is actually happening is that the person himself is vacillating, vacillating between two kinds of faith.

The tremendous contrast between these two kinds of faith can be seen most clearly when Simon Peter recognizes the Lord to be the Son of God. The Lord asked His disciples what people thought of Him. Who did they think He was? The disciples said that some people thought He was John the Baptist, some Elijah, some Jeremiah. But then the Lord asked His disciples what they thought. It was Simon who answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). And so Simon was given the name of Peter, the rock. "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:18-19). Immediately after this, though, as the Lord explained how He was going to be arrested and crucified, Peter contradicted the Lord. "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" (Matthew 16:22) Then it was that the Lord called Simon another name. He called him Satan: "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me" (Matthew 16:23).

Was Peter a rock or was he Satan? Peter himself was neither. But the faith that he represented to begin with, when he acknowledged the Lord's Divinity, was indeed a "rock." Then his representation changes. When he contradicted the Lord, he then represented a different kind of faith, a faith that the Lord refers to as "Satan."

Early in the history of the Christian Church, the Lord's words to Peter, calling him a rock and giving him the keys of heaven, were taken as justification for concentrating the power of the church in the bishop of Rome. The argument was that because Peter later went to Rome, therefore the bishop of Rome—the pope—could claim to be Peter's successor. And, because the Lord had given Peter the power of the keys—the power of opening and closing heaven—therefore the pope could claim power over people's souls.

This is ironic, because the Lord's words to Peter had exactly the opposite meaning. Peter, in acknowledging the Lord's Divinity, represented true faith, the faith of charity, a faith that is lived. It was not Peter himself, but the faith which he expressed, which was called a rock by the Lord. True faith, a faith that is lived, has tremendous power, and upon such a faith the Lord's church is based. Such a faith has power over evil spirits, power over "the gates of hell." And such a faith has the power to open heaven. The reason true faith has this power, the power to save a person's soul, is that the Lord Himself is present in this faith. And it is the Lord alone who has the power to save (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 2760 [preface]:2). No minister, no priest, no bishop, no pope, has this power. Only the Lord Himself can save a person. This is why, when Peter later

contradicts the Lord, he no longer represents a faith that has power. Without the Lord there is no power in faith, no strength at all. Without the Lord, faith cannot save. Such a faith cannot even see the truth. Without the Lord, a man's faith is based in falsity, falsity that is represented by "Satan."

This is why it is so very important to *live* what we *know*. That knowledge of the truth, with which the Lord has provided us, makes possible the most wonderful vision. It helps us to see and understand the purpose of life, the nature of heaven, and even the nature of the Lord Himself. But a vision of the truth, no matter how wonderful it might be, is not the same as a commitment to the truth. And without a commitment to actually living the truth, this truth remains only a vision, a vision that dissolves into empty knowledge.

Think once more of Peter on that night when the Lord was arrested. He had claimed that he would never deny the Lord. He would follow the Lord whatever happened. But Peter, on that night, represented a faith that is not lived. He represented a faith that is accepted only intellectually and emotionally. There is no *commitment* to actually living it. And when faith is not actually lived, it is not a rock. It is as weak as chaff. And so the Lord told Peter that night, "Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). Peter represented a faith in which a person, though he might have a lot of confidence in himself, does not have enough confidence in the Lord to actually live what He teaches. And so it was that when the Lord was arrested, Peter denied the Lord three times.

By this, we are told, the death of the Lord's church is represented. When a person does not live the truth he knows, his faith is faith alone. It is faith in himself, a false and very weak faith. The church cannot be built upon such a faith. The goods and truths of the church therefore die. They die in the person's mind and heart. For, in his heart of hearts, such a person has denied the Lord.

Peter wept bitterly. He had expected so much of himself, yet he had behaved so pathetically. He had the opportunity to stand up and be counted with the Lord. Instead, he vehemently denied that he had ever known Him.

This is the choice that we have. The fact that we have a vision of the truth means that we have a choice. We have a choice to accept the truth only in our heads—in our intellects and in our emotions. But we also have a choice to accept the truth in our lives. We have the choice of actually doing what the Lord has taught us. And if we choose wisely, if we make the commitment to actually live what the Lord tells us, then our faith becomes the faith of charity—a living faith, in which the Lord Himself is present. And when the Lord is present, there is great power. It is the Lord who has power against the gates of hell. It is the Lord who has the keys of heaven. It is the Lord alone who has the power to save.

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 5:1-11, 22:31-34 & 54-62; *Apocalypse Explained* 820:2 (portions)

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