

Series: Faces Around the Cross

Part Two:

"...Denied by Simon Peter"

Mark 14:27-31, 66-72

March 11, 2007

We're continuing this week, as we come up to Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, to go to the events right before Jesus died. We're looking at four people who played roles in that day. Last week we looked at **Pontius Pilate**, who judged Jesus worthy of death and sent Him off to be crucified; today we'll look at **Peter**, who denied Jesus despite being a follower for the three years leading up to the crucifixion. Next week, we'll examine an interesting minor character in the story: **Simon of Cyrene**, the man who was forced to carry Jesus' cross the last part of the walk to Golgotha. And we'll finish with the disciple **John**, the only disciple actually present with Jesus when He was dying on the cross.

Now, the reason to look at these people isn't just to learn about them. There's value in just that, learning about people in the Bible, but we want to do more than that. **The real value is when you get a lesson or two from someone's life.** And these life lessons bring us closer and closer to Jesus. When you look at Pilate, we have a total spiritual failure. Then with Peter we have a believer **who falls flat on his face but recovers.** With Simon of Cyrene, we get a lesson about walking with Jesus and bearing our own cross. And then finally with John, we get a lesson in faithfulness to the end.

I have a dear friend from Puerto Rico, Victor Felix. Today he's back in Puerto Rico, but for ten years he was the pastor of the First Spanish Baptist Church of Philadelphia. That's in a lousy neighborhood, full of crack houses

and warring gangs. Victor had a great ministry with the street toughs there. "They're all the same," said Victor. "Talk to them on the street, they're all macho. Get them alone, they talk about their mamas and the fathers they never knew. It's all peer pressure. They don't come to Christ because they're afraid of what the other guys will say. They don't want to be thought of as wimps."

You don't have to be a street tough to think this way. We don't want to stand out in a crowd. We don't want to look like a fool. And the one way that will do it every time is to be labeled a religious fanatic. For many, a Christian is somebody who's lost their mind. On one college campus, students were asked what they thought of when they heard the word "Christian." Among the more interesting answers were "losers," "insecure people," and my personal favorite: "pimpily-faced geeks."

In the media, call someone a "Christian fundamentalist" and it's like code: "This person is a crazy loon with a low IQ. You can ignore him." Funny, the term "fundamentalist" originally meant someone who held to the **fundamentals** of the Christian faith, is now **the longest four-letter word in American history**.

Talk about appearing tough and not wanting to look like a fool, and you're talking about the disciple Peter. This man, sometimes called the "prince of the apostles" sometimes talks and acts like, as the Brits say, a blooming idiot. So many times in the gospels we see him do and say the dumbest things. Actually, what we see him say and do are often the very same things we would have done in his place!

Let's zero in on the night before the death of Jesus. It's Passover Eve, AD 30. Jesus and His followers have gathered to eat the

Passover. During the meal, Judas slips out to betray Jesus. When they were done there, they walk out together to the west slope of the Mount of Olives to a Garden called Gethsemane. As they walk along, they talk about many things, one in particular: Jesus says that when the moment of true testing came, they would all abandon Him. We read in Mark 14:27-31:

27"You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written:

*" 'I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.'*

28But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

29Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."

30"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

31But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

And I'm sure that Peter and all the others meant it. They over-estimated themselves—something we're all inclined to do.

Did you catch that odd thing Jesus says—“tonight, before the rooster crows twice, you'll deny me three times.” These roosters didn't just crow at dawn. They're in the habit of crowing at about 12:30 AM, then 1:30 then 2:30. No, I don't know how they tell time, they just do. The soldiers who kept watch even called this night watch “cock crow.” What Jesus is telling Peter is that before 1:30 AM that night, he would deny Jesus three times. It must have seemed completely unbelievable to Peter.

At lot can happen in a few hours. You can go from secure to fired, from healthy to struggling for life, from married to abandoned, from secure to ripped off. It doesn't take long. And it didn't take long this night.

They arrived at Gethsemane. Jesus goes off to pray alone, and the hours drag on. Peter and the others nod off to sleep. Then, a sudden noise and wide awake. Guards, Temple and Roman guards! Peter drew his little scabbard and cut the ear off a man named Malchus! There's blood everywhere! Disciples run, Jesus is in chains, but Malchus—well, Jesus heals him. Peter and John flee the scene together, down toward the city. Ahead of them they see the flickering lights of the procession taking Jesus to the home of the High Priest, Caiaphas.

In John 18:15-16, John tells us that he actually knew the high priest. A good guess is that his father Zebedee had done business with Caiaphas. John was able to use that acquaintance to get entry to the room where Jesus was being questioned, and to allow Peter to stay in the courtyard.

Let's not be too rough on Peter. *At least he's there.* That's more than could be said of the nine disciples who ran off like rabbits. Peter is tough, a strong man, but that strength works against him that night. Look at Mark 15:66-68:

66 While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. 67 When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. 68 But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway.

She recognizes him, and says as much: "You were with that Nazarene." Peter was obviously thrown, and gives her what was the formal wording for a legal denial: "I don't know or understand what you're talking about." If that's so, why does he slink back to the shadows of the entryway? Let's count: that's **denial number one.**

Now look at Mark 15:69-70a:

69When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." 70Again he denied it.

The shadows don't work; the servant girl gets chatty and tells the others, and he denies it again. **Denial two.**

On to vs. 70b-72:

*After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." 71He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." 72Immediately the rooster crowed **the second time.** Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.*

The little group of servants and guards must have been talking about this odd stranger. Then it hits them: he must be one of Jesus' men because of his Galilean accent. Cornered, Peter either can fight or run. He couldn't physically run, so his soul went AWOL. So he swore and cursed and said, "I don't even know this Jesus guy!" **Denial three.**

Here's how I imagine it. After his little rant, there's a moment of quiet. The only sound you hear is the crackle of the wood on the fire.

In the glow of the fire, you can see Peter's breath. Then the quiet is disturbed by the sound of a rooster's crowing. And Peter remembers.

Luke 22:61 adds an interesting detail. At that very moment, perhaps from a window above, Jesus turned and look right at Peter. Put yourself in Peter's place. It was an awful moment. It was the worst moment of Peter's life.

One of the great evidences of the accuracy of the Christian faith is the way all the defects of its characters are put on display. From Abraham to Moses to David and now with Peter, you get the whole truth, even the ugly half of it. Peter's no hero. That night he was just an ordinary guy trying to save his skin.

One lesson you can draw from this is that anybody, repeat **anybody**, can fall. Here he is the *numero uno* apostle and at the first sign of enemy shelling, he bugs out. The lesson for all of us is, "Take heed unless you also fall."

Jeff Harlow. You don't know him, but I can't forget him. He was the youth pastor at the church I interned at when I was in seminary. You know the TV show *Everybody Loves Raymond*? Well, they could have made a show called "Everybody Loves Jeff." He was Mr. Popularity. Wherever he went, fun followed. After seminary he went from Massachusetts down to eastern Pennsylvania to pastor a small church. Something went wrong, really wrong with Jeff. One day, all on one day, Jeff resigned his church, left his wife and moved in with another woman, all on the same day. Last I heard he was working as a social worker, and working on a drinking problem as well. I hope he's turned back to the Lord, but don't know. He cut off all his ties to his old friends. What a fall.

So there's a warning to us all here in Peter's story. But there's more. Fortunately for us, we know how the story ends.

We know that Jesus was one of the first at the empty tomb of Jesus. We know that before that day was over, he would see the risen Lord.

We know that a few weeks later, Jesus sought Peter out for a special time of restoration on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Even as Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus gave him three times to affirm his love for the Lord.

We know that Peter was acknowledged as the leader of the apostles, and of the new church in Jerusalem. It was Peter who was the great preacher of the day of Pentecost. It was Peter who opened the door for Gentiles to become part of the Kingdom of God, and then went on to a lengthy ministry of preaching and teaching to message about Jesus in Asia Minor and finally in Rome.

And we are told in tradition that Peter at the end laid down his life as a martyr, crucified in Rome around 65 AD.

What a turnaround. Many people doing what Peter did that night would have given up and stayed away. Some would have even killed themselves like Judas did.

Maybe you're out in the courtyard as far as God goes. You feel far from God. And you feel like you put yourself there. Maybe you did. Maybe you denied Jesus too. Maybe not so much in words but in deeds.

And you think your life is beyond repair. It's like a car. A lot of things you can fix. But then there's other things you can't. Your frame is

twisted and your engine is busted and your axel is twisted. You're totaled.

I usually stay away from illustrations too long ago in history, but I'm going to break that rule and tell you a true story from American history. Many years ago in Tennessee there was a soldier. He was known for being a tough guy, the kind of guy who'd start a fight in a saloon just for the fun of it. In the army, he raided what was then Spanish territory in Florida chasing Seminole Indians. He came across some British subjects there in Florida, who he hanged just for the thrill of it.

Later, people told him that politics was almost as fun as Indian fighting, so he ran for a seat in the statehouse. Pretty soon he was the undisputed leader of his party in Tennessee, which in those days meant that you'd get a seat in the US Senate, which is what he did. And in the Senate he was a rising star, thanks in no small part to his willingness to use the same bare-knuckled talents he'd used in war in politics.

One day he was back home in Tennessee. There was a famous evangelist back in those days by the name of Peter Cartwright. Cartwright was a rough and tumble frontier preacher who personally baptized over 12,000 converts over his long ministry. He came to a church near this Indian-fighter turned Senator's home. Curious, the Senator decided to slip in after the singing had begun and see if this man was as good a speaker as people said.

But there was one little problem. As he came in, the pastor recognized who he was and whispered to Cartwright. Now what he whispered was a mistake. He said that in view of their honored guest, he ought to be careful that he didn't say anything to offend him. Big

mistake. That was like saying, "Sic 'em!" to a dog.

Cartwright got up to speak, and was preaching the message about Jesus and how we need to turn our lives over to him. Everybody, he said, needs Jesus. And about halfway through his message he said,

I understand that there is a US Senator among those present today. And if he does not repent of his sins and accept Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord, he will just as lost and anyone else who has never asked God for forgiveness.

A hush fell over the congregation. Some expected him to storm out in anger. Instead, he admired Cartwright's boldness and conviction. A burning was set afire in his heart. He thought of all the mean and violent things he'd done over the years, and he felt drawn to Jesus as never before. A few days later, he invited Peter Cartwright to his home, where he and his wife gave their lives to Jesus Christ. And he and Cartwright became fast friends. So much so, that Peter Cartwright was invited to the inaugural of that man, Andrew Jackson, when he was elected president of the United States.

Andrew Jackson knew that day what Peter learned from Jesus first hand when the Lord rose from the dead. There is no valley too wide for God's love to cross—no life too wicked, no deed so terrible that God can't reach across and make it right through the death of His Son on the cross.

So there's no need to stay in the shadows. Let His light do its work. Come home to the love of God. That's God's invitation to you today.

**PRAYER
END**