**The Panic of Peter**
**Matthew 26:69-75**
**Gerry Andersen**
**Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School**

All four Gospels record the account of Peter's three denials of Christ (cf. Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27). Each of these accounts contains some differences that have produced a variety of solutions to harmonize them. Some have even resorted to considering that there were six denials of Christ, after failing to understand the relationship between each of the accounts.

One of the difficulties is where in the chronology of events these denials fall. Matthew and Mark place these denials after the Jewish trial before the council and the high priest, while Luke places them before the trial. As we have frequently seen in Matthew's Gospel, he arranged his material more thematically, to make theological points by where he positions the events. Luke tends to follow a more sequential approach to the narrative.

Matthew emphasizes the righteousness of Christ in contrast to the failures of the disciples. Just in this chapter, we have seen the disciples indignant at the anointing of Jesus *"with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume,"* which Jesus corrects them for (26:7-10), Jesus tells them *"You will all fall away because of Me this night"* (26:31) while they disagree with Him (26:35), and the three disciples sleep while Jesus prays at Gethsemane (26:39-45), right before Peter attacks the slave of the high priest and is rebuked by Jesus (26:51-52). Matthew placed the denial of Jesus by Peter immediately after the Jewish trial in order to emphasize our Lord's courage in contrast to Peter's fearfulness.

Luke's account places Peter's denial of Jesus in its chronological order, and John not only confirms this but provides even more insight. John 18:15-18 informs us that the first of Peter's three denials took place at the time of the Jewish trial before Annas, before Annas sent Jesus to Caiaphas and the council. Then, John 18:25-27 places the second and third denials of Christ by Peter just before the beginning of the trial of Jesus before Caiaphas and the ruling council.

Finally, all four Gospels record that Peter denies Jesus *"before a rooster crows."* Luke 22:66 tells us that the council convened the trial of Jesus *"when it was day."* Since the trial began after a rooster would have crowed, this further confirms the sequence of events and shows that Matthew and Mark recorded their accounts thematically.

**The first denial (26:69-70)**

Matthew records the first denial of Jesus by Peter as taking place when *"Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard."* He was with a collection of others who had an interest in the trial of Jesus at such an early hour. *"Now the slaves and the officers were standing there, having made a charcoal fire, for it was cold and they were warming themselves; and Peter was also with them, standing and warming himself"* (John 18:18). Therefore, at some point Peter was sitting (Matthew 26:69) and at another point standing (John 18:18). So we learn from John's account that this was after Peter had entered into the court of the high priest's residence (John 18:15-17; cf. Luke 22:54). Peter was near the fire, apparently just outside a courtyard, according to Matthew.

Matthew notes that this denial was spoken to *"a servant girl."* Mark adds that she was "one of the servant-girls of the high priest" (Mark 14:66). John 18:17 further describes that she was *"the slave-girl who kept the door."* This servant girl was *"seeing him as he sat in the firelight and looking intently at him,"* according to Luke 22:56.

Since Mark 14:67 also states that this servant girl was *"seeing Peter warming himself,"* this puts Peter by the warm fire with the slaves and officers when this denial occurred. Therefore, this was not a private conversation with the servant girl, for other slaves and officers of the temple were there as well. This is why Matthew described this denial as *"before them all."*

The servant girl asked Peter, *"You too were with Jesus the Galilean"* (Matthew 26:69; cf. Mark 14:67; Luke 22:56), and *"You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?"* (John 18:17). Her looking intently at him under the light of the charcoal fire enabled her to recognize him as being one who was with Jesus, likely around the temple area during the past few days, and therefore assuming that he was one of the disciples of Jesus.

She called Jesus *"the Galilean,"* or *"the Nazarene"* (Mark 14:67) in not simply a geographical sense, but in a derogatory sense. Residents of Jerusalem were not only from the capital, but they viewed Galilee as inhabited by many Gentiles (cf. *"Galilee of the Gentiles"* in Matthew 4:15). Thus she considered natives of Jerusalem as geographically, culturally, and religiously superior to natives of Galilee, of which Peter was a part of as well. This negative term would eventually be applied negatively to all of Jesus' followers by classifying them as *"the sect of the Nazarenes."*

Peter gave an emphatic denial, represented by Luke 22:57, *"Woman, I do not know Him."* John 18:17 echoes the firm denial, "I am not." These denials appear to take the form of a formal oath, based upon the Mishnah. This was obviously a false vow since Peter was indeed with Jesus.

Mark 14:68 provides the expanded words that Peter also said, *"I neither know nor understand what you are talking about."* These words were apparently said *"before all."* This was a more nuanced denial, possibly because Peter knew that some of the guards had potentially seen him with Jesus earlier in the garden of Gethsemane. He claims to not understand the girl or know what she was talking about, whereas by his denial to her, he clearly did know what she was talking about in order to deny her claim. This demonstrates the fearful panic that gripped Peter in the midst of the temple guards.

**The second denial (26:71-72)**

Peter then responded to this questioning by the girl by going *"out to the gateway."* This was the entrance to *"the porch"* (cf. Mark 14:68) and was an apparent attempt to escape the light of the fire and hide in the darker area by the courtyard. He realized the problem of people recognizing him and considered himself in some jeopardy being associated with Jesus.

This repositioning by Peter was unsuccessful, since he was noticed by *"another servant-girl."* This second servant girl publicly linked Peter with Jesus when she *"said to those who were there, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.'"* This was a derogatory reference about Jesus by the girl since we read in John 1:46, *"Nathanael said to him, 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?'"*

Mark 14:69 tells us that she also said *"to the bystanders, 'This is one of them!'"* According to Luke 22:58, she also spoke to Peter directly saying, *"You are one of them too!"* Not only did she associate Peter with Jesus, but she believed that he was also one of His disciples.

John's Gospel divides this second denial, along with the third denial, from the first denial, which he places before the trial of Annas. Therefore, we know that these three denials by Peter did not happen in rapid succession but occurred during the period of time when Peter was seeking to observe what was happening with Jesus. John's account also adds that the bystanders around the fire were not just listening to the girl, per Mark 14:69, but also participated in the accusation, *"So they said to him, 'You are not also one of His disciples, are you?'"* (John 18:25).

Peter's second denial was even stronger than his first denial, *"And again he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.'"* This oath was an attempt to validate the truthfulness of his statement that he did not know Jesus by the invocation of solemn judgment upon himself by God if he was lying. Jesus had earlier taught Peter and the crowds to *"make no oath at all"* (Matthew 5:34) but instead of taking an oath to prove what you say, to *"let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil"* (Matthew 5:37).

Therefore, Peter's denial of ever knowing Jesus in this second denial was sinful in three different ways:

1. Peter took an oath in order to prove his words were truthful.
2. Peter violated the oath that he took.
3. Peter did not let his statement be "yes, yes" but he lied.
4. Worst of all, Peter denied even knowing His Savior.

**<u>The third denial (26:73-74)</u>**

This third denial came *"A little later."* Luke 22:59 says this denial came *"After about an hour had passed."* This denial also included bystanders, but here the bystanders were not with Peter, who was *"standing and warming himself"* (John 18:25), but these bystanders *"came up and said to Peter, 'Surely you too are one of them; for even the way you talk gives you away.'"* These people took the initiative in questioning Peter.

The reason the way Peter talked gave him away was explained in Luke 22:59, where *"another man began to insist, saying, 'Certainly this man also was with Him, for he is a Galilean too'"* (cf. Mark 14:70). Therefore, they knew he must have been one of the ones with Jesus because he spoke with an Aramaic dialect that was easily detectable by his pronunciation. The way that Peter spoke made it clear to the Judeans where he was from, and they deduced from his speech that he was one of the ones who were following Jesus on this basis alone. This shows just how much the Judeans connected Jesus with His Galilean upbringing and ministry. Also, this further demonstrates just how self-deceived Peter was, for surely he would have known that the way he talked would give him away.

While Matthew and Mark reference the bystanders, Luke and John focus on one man who acted as their spokesman (Luke 22:59; John 18:26). This man was *"One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off"* according to John 18:26, and therefore he was not sympathetic to Jesus due to his position or by his relation with the man who Peter had struck.

John also notes that this slave of the high priest recognized Peter not just by how he heard him talk but by sight as well, *"Did I not see you in the garden with Him?"* This slave was therefore one of the *"officers from the chief priests"* (John 18:3) who came with Judas to arrest Jesus.

Peter responded to this man and the bystanders even more strongly than his previous denials, *"Then he began to curse and swear, 'I do not know the man!'"* The word for *"swear"* was similar to the oath he took in Matthew 26:72. The word *"oath"* is a noun that refers to a formal pledge of truthfulness before God, while the word *"swear"* is a verb that refers to the act of speaking forth the oath.

However, the word *"curse"* is even stronger, and is from where we derive the word "anathema." It is a forceful placement of oneself under divine damnation if what is said turns out to be false. Peter stated that he did not *"know the man"* and if he were lying, may he be accursed of God. As the accusations mounted and became more specific, Peter's denials became more vehement and extreme.

Each of the four Gospels echoes Matthew 26:74, *"And immediately a rooster crowed."* Mark differs from the other three Gospels by writing *"Immediately a rooster crowed a second time"* (Mark 14:72). This alleged problem is similar to other alleged discrepancies involving one or two things in the Gospels, whenever you have two, you always have one. Matthew and John do not say the rooster only crowed one time. Mark was simply more specific in explaining exactly how many times the rooster crowed.

All of the Synoptic Gospels explain the significance of the rooster crowing, *"And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, 'Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times'"* (Matthew 26:75; cf. Mark 14:72; Luke 22:61). This refers back to what Jesus said to Peter at the Last Supper, *"But Peter said to Him, 'Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.' Peter said to Him, 'Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You'"* (Matthew 26:33-35).

Before he recorded Peter's remembrance, Luke added *"The Lord turned and looked at Peter"* (Luke 22:61). This must have been through a window looking out to the courtyard. It may have been what triggered why "*Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said."* While it is impossible to know if Peter spoke loud enough for Jesus to actually hear his denial, certainly the Lord knew what was happening since He told Peter what would happen.

Upon his remembrance, Peter *"went out and wept bitterly."* This distress is recorded in all the Synoptic Gospels. He was reminded that his failure was in spite of Jesus' prediction and his absolute statement to the Lord, *"Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You"* (Matthew 26:35). He considered himself willing to die the night before, yet was now denying Jesus with many oaths. While he may have been concerned about the condemnation that these oaths would bring upon himself, just prior to Jesus' prediction of these denials, He had also told Peter, *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers"* (Luke 22:31-32). Peter's strength and courage failed, but his faith did not fail. While this would be the last mention of Peter in the Gospel of Matthew, we soon see the great faith of Peter in the midst of persecution (Acts 4-5).

**Conclusion**

This account of Peter's three denials is another stage in the unfolding theme of the weakness of the disciples. Just in this chapter, we've seen them complaining when Jesus was anointed with expensive perfume (26:8), overconfident in themselves (26:33), sleeping while Jesus was praying (26:40-45), and in Luke 22:24 they argued about *"which one of them was regarded to be greatest."* This stands in stark contrast to the righteous courage of Jesus.

Peter's response of great sorrow is also set in contrast to the selfish remorse of Judas in the next section (Matthew 27:3-10). Peter's response was evidence of his true faith, whereas Judas had no faith to be strengthened. His repentance was lived out in his faithfulness, but this was based upon the will of God, for Jesus told His disciples, *"You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain."* Peter's response of repentance was from the power of God.

It is notable that the apostles are not presented in the New Testament as heroes of the faith. They are shown as they really were, common people that God used to do uncommon things according to His wonderful plan. In spite of their weaknesses, God would accomplish His will through them. After the resurrection of Jesus, He gathered them together and *"He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'Which,' He said, 'you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'"* (Acts 1:4-5). The work of His disciples was the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we can trust God to strengthen us in our weakness, knowing that God's plan for us will be accomplished in spite of us.