

"Fires, Denials and Warnings"

John 18:15-18, 25-27

Introduction

When you think of a weathervane, what comes to your mind? Most of you are probably thinking about a rooster on top of an old barn or farm house. But do you know why roosters and weathervanes go together?

In the 9th century there was a papal decree that every steeple in Christendom be donned with – not a cross like we see today – but a rooster. Does that seem odd? But there was a reason. The idea was to remind Christians as they gathered for worship that just as Peter had denied Christ before the rooster crowed, so too did everyone need the forgiveness and mercy of God. It also stood as a call to the unrepentant to lay aside their sin and come to Christ.

Since weathervanes were also important instruments in weather forecasting, and since the church usually stood in the middle of the town and was the most visible building in the community, it became the practice of many churches to adorn the steeple with a weathervane depicting the rooster. You can still drive in the country of New England states and find old churches with the rooster perched on top of the steeple. Not a bad reminder of our need for Christ as one gathers to worship each Lord's Day.

Today as we come to the text that describes Peter's infamous denial of Christ, we are going to see that any Christian who walks in the strength of

his own flesh will succumb to the temptation to deny Christ. In fact, we can make a strong argument that if Peter could fall, anyone can fall. Even the strongest are vulnerable to this sin.

[John 18:12-27]

In our study of the Larger Catechism in the evening service, our focus the last few weeks has been on the humiliation of Christ. As we get into the heart of John 18, we are reaching the pinnacle of that humiliation.

- arrested as though He were a criminal instead of the sinless Son of God.
- Bound as though He were dangerous or a threat to flee – when in fact He was giving Himself up willingly.
- After the initial shock and fear that came with finding Jesus so easily in the Garden, the soldiers and accompanying mob regained their footing. Their bloodthirsty souls returned with a vengeance as they marched Jesus off into the lion's den awaiting him in Jerusalem.

Consider the perspective of the disciples as these events unfolded. Chaos must have broken loose. The gospels tell us that the disciples quickly scattered and fled. The mob tried to detain anyone they thought was associated with Jesus. It had to be a horrifying, intimidating, confusing few moments.

But when the dust settled, the disciples were gone and Jesus was led away as a sheep to the slaughter.

But our study this morning is about Peter. So what of him? What happened to Peter?

We're told all the disciples fled, so we can assume that Peter quickly regained his composure.

He had professed at an earlier time that he had courage. He had been repulsed by the predictions of Christ that He would be arrested and killed. He'd challenged Jesus about that. And just moments before he'd backed those words with action. He'd taken his sword and initiated a battle – only to be stopped and rebuked by Christ.

But here's the thing we don't want to lose as we study the denial of Peter. Peter loved Jesus. He loved him deeply. His faith was genuine. He longed to be loyal and faithful to Christ. And as compulsive as he was, he had a courage that the others lacked. Verse 15 tells us that after the chaos in the garden, he very quickly turned around and began to follow Jesus. We don't see the others doing that. He followed all the way back to Jerusalem and walked right into the lion's den.

But as it turned out, this courage was misplaced and foolish. Courage for the sake of courage is not always wise. Peter walked right into a temptation that he was unprepared to handle. So let's talk about why he fell into sin. Why did this faithful disciple of Christ so easily deny His Savior and Lord?

1. His understanding of Christ was too weak. This doesn't mean he didn't know Christ. He is the one who professed *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God*. But for Peter and the rest of the disciples, it would not be until after the resurrection that they would begin to understand the necessity and purpose of the cross. No matter how much Jesus had explained it.

Without that, Peter was ill-equipped to stand up against the powers of darkness that gathered in the high priest's house that night. You see, victory over sin and temptation comes from a strong and abiding faith in the gospel. At the end of Hebrews 5

and the beginning of 6, the writer chastises the people of God because their faith and knowledge of Christ was stagnate and weak. And he demonstrates that a weak faith leads to trouble with sin. It is the truth of Christ's atoning work that gives us a foundation to stand upon. It is the faith in the truth that sets us free. The beginning place for freedom from sin is knowing and understanding who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

Listen, if you are a Christian, you have everything you need in Christ for victory. But that doesn't mean that if your faith is immature and your knowledge of Christ is weak, that every place will be safe for you. It's not always a good idea for a young Christian to go into situations that will test him beyond His faith. Remember the struggles of young Mark on the first missionary journey. He was ill-prepared for the trials and persecutions of the mission field. Peter would soon receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon him, but here and now he was not ready to stand alone for Christ.

2. His pride was too strong.

One of the weakness of our fallen nature is that are prone to think that we are able to do things we cannot. Did you read about the 6 year old boy who got hungry this week and decided to get in his parents car and drive to Subway? He got the car started and put it into reverse. Somehow he was able to apply pressure to the gas pedal. Problem was he didn't have any ability to drive. He just kept backing up until he took out a utility pole and disrupted power to a few thousand customers.

Do you remember the exchange between Jesus and Peter just a few hours before His arrest? Matthew 26:33 ff records this: *Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of*

the flock shall be scattered.’ . . . 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.”

Again, we can see the desire and love in Peter’s words, but there is a pride in them that boasts of an inner strength apart from Christ. When Jesus had been faced with the temptation to forego the cross, He agonized in prayer until His Father granted Him victory. But while this monumental spiritual battle was raging, Peter was sleeping.

As one commentator pointed out, the perfect Savior who could do no wrong prayed when tempted. The weak disciple slept. We could easily see it the other way. It was the disciple who needed to pray, but didn’t. And Christ, who was God who poured out His soul to God.

If Peter had been less confident of his own ability, he might well have shaken off the sleep to seek God.

When temptation draws near to you, there is nothing you need more than to draw near to Christ because you should know that in yourself you will surely fall.

- His understanding of Christ too weak
- His pride too strong.

3. His companions were too corrupt.

The courtyard of the high priest was like a lion’s den that night. It was the gathering place for all who yearned for the demise of Christ. Into that pit, Peter dared to walk. It took the aid of another disciple for him to gain access. Some speculate that the unnamed disciple of verse 15 must have been John since he often left himself unidentified. But many

agree that it is unlikely that John would have had an established relationship with the high priest and that this disciple was probably a secret follower of Christ – perhaps Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimethea.

At any rate, as Peter entered the courtyard, the slave girl who kept the door asked Peter if he was one of Jesus' disciples. At this point he gave his first denial. There are two things to think about concerning this first denial.

*. It took very little for Peter to fall. This lowly servant attending the door had no authority or power, yet she struck a great fear into Peter's heart. Here is a grave warning about the lack of strength or power that we possess on our own. I think if your honest with yourself you'll admit that sometimes you sin at the least provocation.

* Mark tells us that at this point a rooster crowed for the first time. It was as though God gave a warning call to Peter to wake him from His slumber. But it was to no avail. Peter staggered on to his own hurt.

Next Peter walked straight to the fire where the soldiers and the mob had gathered to warm themselves. No doubt there were many people there and people were likely coming and going. This was hostile crowd. We can only imagine the recounting of the arrest and the mocking of Christ. And someone there thought they recognized Peter as a disciple and asked him. He denied it a second time.

Finally, it was the relative of Malchus who gave a positive ID. This one would know – having an emotional interest in the one who'd lost his ear. But Peter denied it again – this time, according to the other gospel accounts, with swearing and oaths.

His faith was weak.

His pride was strong.
His decisions were foolish.

What can we learn?

1. There is great danger in standing in the path of sinners and sitting in the seat of scoffers. Psalm 1 ought to resonate in our ears. This is exactly where Peter landed. His intentions may have been noble, but his actions were foolish.

Clearly he could have boldly identified with Christ and made good on his promise to die with Christ. Maybe he could have even been a witness for Christ that night. At least he should have remained wisely silent when asked about Christ. He was not obligated to answer to this crowd.

But rather than fleeing from the hostility of those gathered, he placed himself in the middle of them. We will never walk victoriously over sin, if we surround ourselves with those who are hostile to Jesus. *Two are better than one for they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them stumbles, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who stumbles when there is not another to lift him up.* Are you walking through the Christian life alone? Don't! Are you standing in the way of sinners and sitting with those who scoff at the gospel. Don't! Beware of the dangers of standing with the enemies of Christ alone.

2. Sin is emboldened when we yield. At the first sign of failure, Peter should have fled. But sin seizes the opportunity for more sin. Had Peter stayed all night, he no doubt would have continued to deny Christ. If you are caught up in sin, there must be a breaking away. Flee from sin lest it ensnare you.

Peter could have escaped this sin. God always provides a way of escape. Jesus had told

Peter it was coming. He knew the specifics, yet he still fell into it. There was another Christian present. Why was Peter not with him? God even provided a first warning crow from the rooster, but it went unheeded. Sin is croaching at the door. *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.*

3. God always provides a way back.

When the cock crowed after Peter's third denial, it was like the voice of God calling to him. No one else would have taken note of its significance – other than to perhaps wonder why a rooster would crow in the middle of the night. But Peter knew.

And coupled with that, Luke tells us that Peter was close enough to the Lord that Jesus actually turned and looked at him when he denied him. Can you imagine a more piercing and painful glance than to see the hurt and pain your action brings to your Savior? The combination of the crowing rooster and the look of Christ broke the pride and sin in Peter's heart and he went out and wept bitterly.

But behind the look and the crow was one other significant thing. There was the prayer and the commitment of Jesus to Peter. In Luke 22:31, 32 Jesus had said this to 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.*

I think this is where we should end today. If you are a Christian, then you need to know that Jesus has this kind of commitment toward you. Nothing can separate you from the love of Christ. No

one will snatch you out of His hands. You are not free to sin. You belong to Him and He demands of you love and obedience. But if you fail . . . when you fail, know that He has provided the way for you to return. You see, that's why He went to the cross. At Calvary, your sins were paid for. At Calvary, your life was purchased by God. So put off your sin. And when you falter – when you deny Him – go out and weep over your sin. Seek His forgiveness and He will wash you and make you clean.