

"He Began to Curse and Swear"

As we look at this passage for today, I'd like to set the background for this passage by reminding you of what we talked about last week. Last week we looked at Jesus' trial, verses 53 through 65. And I noted that in verse 54, Mark interrupted telling us about the trial to tell us that Peter had followed behind at a distance and was now in the courtyard warming himself by the fire and sitting with the servants. I mentioned last week that Mark told us this in verse 54 to connect Jesus' trial with these verses that follow that tell us of Peter's threefold denial. In other words, I made the point last week that these events happened at the same time. Jesus was undergoing his trial, while Peter was denying that he knew Jesus. Jesus was being falsely accused, with false witnesses standing up and lying about Jesus, while Peter stood by and lied about knowing Jesus. Peter could have been a truthful witness to Christ at the court case, instead he stood just outside, too scared to acknowledge that he even knew Jesus. Peter didn't witness for Peter, he denied him.

And so today we're going to focus in on Peter's story. We're going to think about Peter's life in general, but especially this three-fold denial. And so I have four points today about Peter. I want to look first at Peter's confidence. Then at Peter's fear. Then at Peter's sadness. Then finally at Peter's joy. So, we'll look at Peter's confidence, fear, sadness, and joy.

Let's begin first with Peter's confidence. Simon Peter was quite a bold disciple, and he was that way right from the start. He's the first disciple mentioned in this book back in Mark 1, who boldly dropped his fishing net to follow Jesus when Jesus called him. Later in Mark 1, when Jesus tries to get away from the crowds and find some solitude, it was Simon who led others to go looking for Jesus. When Jesus asked all the disciples back in chapter 8 who they thought he was, Mark reports that it was Peter who answered for everyone, "You are the Christ." When that followed with Jesus telling the disciples that he had a mission of suffering ahead, Peter then proceeded to rebuke Jesus. That wasn't a good thing of course, but it was a sign of his boldness. When Jesus went up to the mountain where he was transfigured, and Elijah and Moses showed up, the three disciples with Jesus were dumbfounded, left almost speechless. But somehow Peter managed to get a few words out and offered to setup tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Those words seem almost silly in retrospect, but bold Peter had to say something.

Again, in Mark 10, when Jesus spoke to the rich young ruler, the disciples saw Jesus tell the rich young ruler to leave everything and follow him. Peter spoke up at that time and reminded the Lord how they had left everything to follow him - obviously comparing himself with the rich young ruler who was not willing to do that. In Mark 11, when Jesus cursed the fruitless fig tree, it was Peter who pointed out the next day how the fig tree had withered.

Peter's boldness was from the start, and we see it continued into this chapter as well. It was earlier in this chapter when Peter vowed to remain loyal to Jesus, even to the death. It was Peter, of course, we know, that took up the sword when they had come to arrest Jesus. It's Peter who we find even now following Jesus and his captors from a distance, watching what would happen to his Lord.

Peter is bold. I think it must be a part of his personality. This boldness can seem quite foreign to some of us. But for some it can be something we identify

with. But boldness and confidence isn't always a good thing. Someone can be overconfident or have misplaced confidence. "Curious George," the little monkey in the cartoons, could be described as confident, but that confidence got him in trouble a lot, didn't it? Peter's confidence got him into trouble at times too. Often our apparent confidence is not really confidence at all. Sometimes it's just having a nonchalant attitude that doesn't evaluate the possible consequences of our actions before we speak or act. In other words, what looks like confidence might just be irresponsible impulsiveness. I wonder if some of what Peter has done up to this point in Mark might be categorized as that. What Peter needs and what all of us need is a biblical confidence. Confidence in the Lord.

In the book of Acts we learn a lot more of Peter. But at that time he is a new man. He'll have a new wave of confidence after the day of Pentecost. You see at that time, he'll find his confidence in the Lord when the Holy Spirit is poured out on him. That's the same source that we need for our confidence. If you're confidence is in yourself, or in others, it probably will be disappointed. If it's in the Lord, your boldness is not misplaced or overstated.

But whatever boldness Peter may have had at this point in his life, we see it shaken in our passage. I think this is a major clue that Peter's confidence had either been misplaced, or maybe only apparently there. Despite his vow of going the distance with the Lord, we see his confidence met with fear. And so I'd like to look now at Peter's fear. Of course, this is a fear that leads to sin. Peter's initial fear comes right before this passage, when he and all the other disciples fled at Jesus' arrest. But then as we said, in verse 54 we found that he had regained some courage and had followed behind from a distance to where Jesus had been taken. We find him in our passage in the courtyard of the high priest. Jesus was being tried by the Sanhedrin at the house of the high priest, and Peter was hanging out in the courtyard, warming himself by the fire. Peter's fear manifests itself then by only following from a distance, unwilling to stand by Jesus under persecution. He was unwilling to stand up at his trial and testify on his behalf.

So Peter's fear is then shown through the first denial. Verse 66. One of the servant girls of the high priest questions him. How appropriate. Peter wouldn't stand up before the high priest during Jesus' trial. He wouldn't stand by Jesus when the high priest questioned him. But Peter doesn't escape the question, does he? So it's fitting that a servant *of the high priest* asks him the first question. This just reminds you of the fact that Peter isn't standing before the high priest to witness to Jesus. But he gets questioned nonetheless, essentially by the high priest, through his servant girl. Instead of being in the court, answering the high priest, he's in the courtyard answering the servant of the high priest. And yet Peter falls short here as well. He gives into his fear. He probably started to panic when the girl accused him, "You also were with Jesus of Nazareth." But Peter's fear is met with a lie. He denied it saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are saying." One commentator I read said that this was a very legalese sort of response. It was an official way to deny an allegation. Maybe it might have been like saying today before a court, "I don't recall."

But of course, then the rooster crows. Verse 68. Earlier in this chapter Jesus had warned Peter that he'd denied him three times before the rooster crows twice. Sometimes we think of just a random rooster crying out. But that's because we don't understand the Palestine roosters. I'm told that even still today the roosters have a few regular intervals of crowing during the night. They do it so regularly that it was a way to help tell time at night. The first crowing would have been a small crowing somewhere around midnight. That first crowing was small enough that it often wasn't even considered a crowing. But the next two crowings would have happened around 2am and 3am. These are probably the two crowings Jesus

was referring to. When these roosters begin to crow, the crowing might last for several minutes, then die down, and then the next crowing happens about an hour later. Strange, yes, but that's what I'm told they do in that area. So the cock crowing could serve to help mark time.

So what's my point with all this chicken talk? Well, here Peter gets the first of the two crowings after his first denial. This is the first of the two markers predicted by Jesus. But Peter doesn't take notice. At this point he's too consumed with panic and fear. He's too busy denying his Lord to notice it. Peter missed the sign that could have reminded him of his sin. Remember, Jesus had just told him he would fall away that very evening before the rooster crows twice. Jesus had just told him to watch and pray that he wouldn't fall into temptation. How quickly he forgot to watch out for this. He ends up denying his Lord and just missing the sign of his fall into sin. What signs of our sin do we miss?

While Peter misses this sign, we see that his fear continues to surge. So what does he do? Well, it looks like he heads for the door. Verse 68 says that he went out on the porch, which is specifically referring to the gateway or entrance into the courtyard. But his escape isn't that quick, is it? A servant girl again sees him and then there is another accusation. Verse 69. "This is one of them." And so what does Peter do? He denies it again. He denies being a follower of Jesus.

But isn't that how sin works? Sin is like a web. One sin usually leads to another, and to another, and so on. Especially when you are lying. That's a common sitcom, topic isn't it? One lie leads to another. Because you lie to one person, then you have to lie to another person to cover up your first lie, and so on. Lying, and sin in general, quickly becomes chronic. It's sticky. You get caught in its trap and you can't get out. We know that's how sin works. Peter's fear had caused him to panic and then he tried to sin his way out of trouble. But now he has to sin again by denying Jesus a second time.

And then finally Peter's fear gives into to a third denial. Verse 70. His accent draws him out. The bystanders basically say, "Oh really, you don't know Jesus the Nazarene? The one from Galilee that all those Galileans have been going after, and are now spreading to here in Jerusalem? We don't believe you - just listen your accent gives you away. You're a Galilean, and so you must be a follower of this Jesus." Again, see how your sin follows you?

Look at how Peter responds this third time. It's pretty sad. In verse 71 he starts cursing and swearing. "I don't know this man of whom you speak!" Let me clarify what's going on here so that it doesn't get lost in translation. It's not that Peter is using bad words here. You might get that impression. The second action, his "swearing," is the language of oaths. He's making a solemn promise or vow. You know like in the courtroom where you say, "I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." People do this in everyday speech. "I'm telling you the truth, I swear." When we swear, it's like saying, "No, I'm really serious about this, I'm telling you the 100% absolute truth. You can count on this."

Peter's swearing here is bad, since it's a lie. But the first thing he does is even worse. The action for "cursing" here is not about using bad language. This word in the Greek is very similar to taking an oath, but it's an oath where you bind it with a curse. It's like Peter says, may God curse me, if what I am saying is not true. Do you see how bad that is? Kids sometimes say, "Cross my heart and hope to die." That's a similar idea. You put your life on the line as a guarantee of the truth of your words. Peter is basically doing that from a divine point of view. Peter's invoking a curse if his words aren't true.

Sadly, Peter's curse upon himself is exactly what he deserves at this point. He denied Jesus three times. He was ashamed of Jesus. But what had Jesus said about someone being ashamed of him? Jesus said in Mark 8:38 "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." Jesus said back in Mark 8 that the person who is ashamed of him is indeed under a curse. Peter's words here at this third denial are deeply troubling. They are deeply troubling because they ironically ring so true. These words by Peter are damnable. They are indeed worthy of divine curse. Peter's fear had led him to this horrible series of sins against our Lord. It left him worthy to be cursed.

But I'd like to turn now to look at Peter's sadness. You see, in the midst of Peter's fear, something interrupts him. Something interrupts this third denial of Jesus. Notice in verse 71 there is the word "began." Peter began to curse and swear. But then in verse 72 in the Greek it actually has the word "immediately," immediately the rooster crowed a second time. Some of the English translations will bring this out. The idea is this. Here Peter starts denying Jesus in this very forceful way, cursing and swearing, and what finally stops him is the second cock crowing. Peter stops. Suddenly it hits him what he has done.

Verse 72 says that Peter suddenly "remembered." He called to mind what Jesus had said. Jesus had told him that he would deny him three times before the rooster crows twice. Peter had so forcefully told Jesus, "No, never!" I won't fall away! But now the rooster crowed the second time. And now Peter was caught in the act. The rooster crowed right at the climax of his third denial. Right when he was making clear to the world his confession of faith. "I don't know this man of whom you speak. I swear it. May I be cursed if I am lying."

And so what does Peter do? He weeps. His Jesus was right. That very night he had given into fear. He had denied his Lord three times. All his boldness and confidence disappeared under the panic of possible arrest. And when he finally came to his senses, he realized that he had sinned. And so he weeps. The shorter catechism tells us that repentance includes in part the grief and hatred of our sin. Surely Peter here recognized his sin and grieved over it. Maybe all the curses that he had just threatened himself with came flooding into his mind. The internal tension that Peter seemed to have of wanting only a glorious Christ but then being willing to follow a suffering one, even to death, had come to a confrontation that night. And sin had won out. What was Peter to do now? He grieved over his sin. Surely he recognized he was worthy to be cursed by God. What hope was there for Peter? What could he do to make this right? How could his sadness be turned to joy?

Well there was good news for Peter and there is good news for us. I'd like to turn now to our last point. I'd like to look at Peter's joy. Peter's story does not end here. Remember back to earlier in this chapter. When Jesus had told the disciples that they'd all fall away, and that Peter would deny him three times. At that same time he also offered them hope. In Mark 14:28 Jesus offered the hope of a reunion and a restoration. He told them that after the resurrection, Jesus would go before them into Galilee. Jesus would go before them to Galilee and there, in Galilee, they would be restored to Jesus.

Well Mark will go on to remind us of that promise again. Flip over to Mark 16:7 if you have your Bible open. In the last chapter, toward the very end of the book, we see an angel speak to the ladies who had gone to Jesus' tomb and found it empty. The angel told the ladies that Jesus was risen. And then the angel gave a message to the ladies. The angel said in Mark 16:7, "But go and tell his disciples - and

Peter - that he is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as he said to you." And Peter. Just in case the disciples forgot, Jesus had his angel remind them. Even though they forsook him and fled, he would restore them. And Peter who had such an infamous three-fold denial of Jesus would not be left out of that restoration. Though many of the disciples had probably just fled and hid out during those three days while Jesus was dead, Peter had sealed his forsaking of Jesus by these three public denials of him. And yet Jesus would restore Peter as well. Jesus, such a loving shepherd, knew the sadness of Peter. He knew the weeping and mourning of Peter over his sin. And so Jesus didn't just send a message for all the disciples. He specifically called out Peter by name in his message. "Tell the disciples - and Peter." What a Savior. What a Lord.

And yet on what basis can Jesus restore Peter? How can he turn his sadness into gladness? We already said that Peter was worthy of a curse. Peter had called that down upon himself at this third denial. Peter could but weep in response when he recognized that. On what basis could Jesus restore Peter? Cursed Peter? By becoming a curse. Jesus took on Peter's curse on the cross. Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')." On the cross, Jesus became a curse for Peter, and for us!

This is why Peter could be restored to Jesus in Galilee. This is why Peter is not accursed to hell. He had found forgiveness in Christ. He did not just stay weeping. He went to Galilee and found his savior there. This is the source of Peter's joy. There is joy in the Lord. That's where true joy is found - in the Lord who offers forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness for sins that are worthy of a curse. Remember, Jesus had said in Mark 8, that if you are ashamed of him before man, then Jesus would be ashamed of you at the final judgment. In other words, you would be under the curse of eternal damnation in hell. But we see here in Mark that there is even forgiveness of that. Peter would not taste damnation. He would not taste of the curse he called down upon himself. Because while Peter was calling down curses upon himself, Jesus was heading ever closer to the cross where he would take on those very curses himself. Jesus became a curse for Peter. And if you trust in him, then he has taken on the curse that you deserved as well. This is the good news of the gospel. There is forgiveness of sins in Christ. Sins even like these. Even if you've denied Christ in the past. There is forgiveness through faith in Christ. Believe in him. This is Peter's joy and it is our joy.

Saints of God, we've seen Peter's denial of Jesus and I'd like to ask: What causes us to waver and deny the Lord? Even as disciples of Christ, we can still find ourselves stumbling at times in our faith. Maybe it's just a temporary hiccup where we don't speak up for Jesus when we should. Maybe it's a time of rebellion in our life where we turn away for weeks or months or maybe years. What causes us to waver in these ways? Maybe we are too concerned about receiving the approval of others. Maybe we fall under peer pressure. Maybe we are afraid of persecution. Maybe we just have too many lusts in this world. Or maybe we are just too self-absorbed. For any of us it could be for different reasons at different times in our life.

Peter's story should cause us to reflect on our own life. One moment he was boldly vowing loyalty to Jesus. The next moment we seem him scared for his life. He quickly forgot his vow. He gave into fear and panicked. He denied the Lord. Peter needed to watch and pray against temptation. He should have stood fast with his Lord. But I hope this reminds us of an important truth. Bold vows of fidelity don't guarantee faithfulness. Just because you promise to always serve Jesus, doesn't mean you will. Just because you promise to be faithful, doesn't mean you

will. You can vow with all sincerity and intention to follow Jesus to the end, and you could still break that promise.

Reading this passage at first, and thinking about this truth, might at first cause you some angst. Thinking about this might unsettle you at first. You might find yourself wanting assurance and then find that lacking. But I hope that this passage actually serves the opposite. I hope this passage gives you a renewed sense of assurance.

You see, we believe in this doctrine called the perseverance of the saints. It's an important doctrine. It says that when God starts a work of real faith in us, he finishes it. It says that whoever are truly Christian will never permanently fall away. They may fall away for a time, but God will eventually restore them. Now of course, this doctrine is a very misunderstood one. We often can abuse it. It is not a doctrine that should tell you that you can profess to be a believer and then live anyway you want, because once saved, always saved. No. This doctrine is about giving God the praise for saving us. It's to say that when a person perseveres in faith, it's to the credit of God. God carries a believer through in their journey of faith. And so the doctrine of the perseverance of saints says that those who have *real* faith, will never permanently fall away. There could be people who have a *false* faith that do fall away. In fact the church is full of such examples. But if Christ has started a work in our heart, he will bring it to completion. As Hebrews says, he is the author and perfecter of our faith (12:2).

Isn't that what this passage shows us. Here is Peter. He's denied the Lord. A sin worthy of curse, of eternal damnation. But, Christ would call him back to himself. Christ would restore him. Christ would make sure that he completed the race of faith. When Peter stumbled and fell, Christ was there to pick him up, so to speak, dust him off, and send him back on the road of discipleship. Jesus turned Peter's sadness into joy. And he turned Peter's fear into confidence - real genuine confidence. Confidence and joy in the Lord.

You see, Peter's story is our story. If we are going to have assurance of our faith, it will be by finding it in Jesus. If we are going to have confidence and joy, it will be by finding it in Jesus. If we are to persevere as saints, it will be because Jesus carries us through. It will be because Jesus is at work in our lives, just like he was in Peter's. That's how we persevere. If Jesus is at work in our lives, we will persevere. If we truly believe in Jesus, we will not permanently fall away. That is the greatest assurance we can have.

Saints, this might seem like a minor distinction, but it's such an important one. If we persevere in our faith because of Jesus, that is grounds for real confidence and real assurance. There's no real assurance and confidence if our perseverance is about our own selves. If it's all up to us, then we'd have no real assurance. We know how wayward we can be. We know how we are prone to waver and wander like sheep. But we have a Good Shepherd. He leads and guides us. He directs us home. If we see that he is the way we can persevere in our faith, then we can have real assurance and real confidence and real joy. We have a Lord who leads us home. Look in faith to his leadership. Should you stumble and fall, look to him. Yes, repent. Yes, weep and grieve over your sins. But then look to him. Look to him for forgiveness and look to him to pick you up and lead you home. He certainly will.

Let me close with some words of wisdom from Peter on this subject. 2 Peter 1:10 "Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble." This is the mystery of our faith. Even if we fall temporarily, we persevere if we are God's elect. Peter

tells us to make sure we are God's elect by being diligent in godliness. By adding to our faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, and perseverance. What a beautiful mystery we find in Scripture. We are called to persevere in godliness, and when we do, we see that it was all God's work in our life. All his grace. He gets all the glory. But there is no better way. And no better source of assurance, confidence, and joy. And so let's make our calling and election sure by living our lives for Christ. And as we do this, may we take heart that he is the one who carries us through. Amen.

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