

Peter's Denial of the Lord

W. Kelly.

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Flesh in the saint is no better than in any other man. Peter did not know this more than most do now. He did not believe our Lord's warning: if he had, he had not entered into temptation, but would have watched, prayed, and been kept through faith. He must therefore by bitter experience learn what the flesh is, as the word was not mixed with faith in his soul when the Lord warned him so solemnly. He was confident in himself. It was not the vulgar confidence of an unbeliever, no doubt; but still it was confidence built on his own estimate of what his love for Jesus would enable him to do or bear. And this it was which, as it is an illusive and mischievous egoism, grace must expose, as it does pardon, and would turn to profit and blessing, not only to Peter, but to his brethren through him. For now and thus he was humbled and had learnt what man is on the one hand, and what God is on the other. If Peter was to be used of the Lord more than all, it was meet that he should more than any learn experimentally his more than nothingness.

The other disciples forsook the Lord and fled. John slipped in, as an acquaintance of the high priest's. Peter followed afar off. Wherefore this? Asleep when called to watch and pray, he awoke to draw the sword and strike, all-through out of communion with the adorable Master. If, bolder than the rest, he ventured into the circle of those who smote the Lord, it was only to sink lower than any and to dishonour Him by a denial which a few hours before seemed to him impossible, by a repeated denial with imprecations and oaths. Only Judas went farther in iniquity. Jesus alone shone in perfection; yet never was His shame and humiliation more complete, save when He hung on the cross, rejected of His people, despised of men, and forsaken of God. It was sin on man's part, and for sin on God's: what a climax of reality for both, as the believer knows, in Christ the Lord!

There and then it was that Peter heard a cock crow twice immediately after he denied his Master thrice. How insignificant such a sound ordinarily! *Then* how pregnant with the deepest consequence, not to the penitent apostle only, but to his brethren whom he soon began to strengthen, and to the multitudes whom he was honoured of God in bringing by the word he preached, out of darkness into His marvellous light! But it was the Lord's look upon Peter, and the remembrance of His words, which gave it all the force that wrought in conscience and heart, the look and words of the Saviour brought home by the Holy Spirit where there was life Godward. But alas! flesh had shrouded all and the believer, having slept, had cursed and sworn as if he never knew the Master. Now in bitter grief he learns himself humiliatingly, and what the world is in its highest religious pretensions; yet what would all else have been, had he not learnt the grace of Christ and His moral glory, and God Himself in the cross of Christ and the purpose and ways of redeeming love?

But, in that light grace gave Peter to discern the worthlessness of the flesh alike in its weakness and in its energy, in its unbounded self-confidence and in its dastardly fear and falsehood. Yet was he a saint, thoroughly sincere and most truly loving the Lord; but a saint not yet broken before God, with self but little judged, who slighted really if unwillingly His word and neglected prayer and so entered into temptation, instead of being upheld in the dependence of conscious weakness and the power of faith by grace. But Peter, (brought down in self-judgment to own that, far from boasting of his love for Christ more than any, only omniscience could know that he dearly loved Him) is then fully re-instated in what might otherwise have seemed forfeited for ever, and hears the blessed Lord in the presence of the brethren committing to His care His beloved sheep and lambs, and promising that he should in very deed be enabled at length to go to prison and death, yea the cross itself, for Christ's sake. Grace thus ensured to him when old and weak all that which in his natural vigour he, a saint withal, had failed in so foully, and with every possible aggravation of dishonour to his Lord.

Now we are told that the accounts exhibit discrepancies, but these, it is said apologetically, owing to the disciples' perturbation of mind! Let us read them: here they are:

MATT. 26: 69-75.

"But Peter followed him from afar off unto the court of the high priest, and entering in was sitting with the officials to see the end" (58) "Now Peter was sitting without in the court, and a maid came unto him, saying, Thou also wast with Jesus, the Galilean. But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest. And when he went out into the porch, another [maid] saw him and saith to those there, This [man] also was with Jesus the Nazarene. And again he denied with an oath, I know not the man. And after a little those that stood came up and said to Peter, Truly thou also art [one] of them, for thy speech too maketh thee manifest. Then he began to curse and to swear, I know not the man. And immediately a cock crew. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus as having said, Before a cock crew, thou wilt thrice deny me. And going forth without he wept bitterly" (69-75).

MARK 14: 66-72.

"And Peter from afar off followed him, even within, into the court of the high priest, and was sitting with the officials and warming himself at the [fire] light" (54). "And as Peter was below in the court, there cometh one of the maids of the high priest, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked on him and saith, Thou also wast with the Nazarene, Jesus. But he denied, saying, I know not [him], nor understand what thou sayest. And he went out into the fore-court, and a cock crew. And the maid seeing him again began to say to the bystanders, This is [one] of them. And he again kept denying. And after a little again the bystanders were saying to Peter, Truly thou art [one] of them, for also thou art a Galilean. But he began to curse and to swear, I know not this man of whom you speak. And immediately a second time a cock crew. And Peter recalled to mind the word, how Jesus said to him, Before a cock crew twice, thou wilt thrice deny me. And as he thought thereon he kept weeping" (66-72).

LUKE 22: 54-62.

"But Peter followed afar off. And when they lit a fire in the midst of the court, and sat down together, Peter sat amid them. And a certain maid, having seen him sitting at the [fire] light, and looking steadily at him, said, This [man] also was with him. But he denied, saying, I know him not,

woman. And after a short [while] another saw him and said, Thou also art [one] of them. But Peter said, Man, I am not. And after the lapse of about one hour, another affirmed strongly, saying, Of a truth, this [man] also was with him, for also he is a Galilean. But Peter said, Man, I know not what thou sayest. And immediately, while he was yet speaking, a cock crew, and the Lord turned and looked on Peter; and Peter called to mind the word of the Lord, how he said to him, Before a cock crow this day, thou wilt deny me thrice. And going forth without he wept bitterly" (54-62).

JOHN 18: 25-27.

"But Simon Peter followed Jesus, and the other disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and went in with Jesus into the court of the high priest; but Peter was standing at the door without. The other disciple therefore, that was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the portress, and brought in Peter. The maid, the portress, saith therefore to Peter, Art thou also one of this man's disciples? He saith, I am not. Now the bondmen and the officials, having made a fire of charcoal (for it was cold), were standing and warming themselves; and Peter was standing with them and warming himself" (15-18). "Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They said therefore to him, Art thou also [one] of his disciples? He denied and said, I am not. One of the bondmen of the high priest, being a kinsman of him whose ear Peter cut off, saith, Did not I see thee in the garden with him? Again therefore Peter denied, and immediately a cock crew" (25-27).

1. It will be noticed in this corrected version of the various accounts that it is a question of the high priest's "court," not palace, which more properly applies to the governor's residence or praetorium (Matt. 27; John 18), which no doubt had its court also, as is also intimated in Mark 15: 16. In Luke 22: 54 the "house" of the high priest is distinguished from the "court" or open yard. Confusion on this head has obscured the truth; for Peter was not where the preliminary enquiry was held, but "without" and "below" in the court-yard. There at the light of the fire the maid that kept the door (John) taxed him with being a disciple of the Nazarene (Matt., Mark). It has been assumed by some that John puts the first denial in the porch or forecourt; but this is quite to overrule the import of ver. 18, which seems to me appended for the special purpose of guarding against such an error, and adds a correction in the characteristic manner of our Evangelist; just as ver. 24 is meant parenthetically, to correct the hasty assumption that the first general interrogatory was before Annas to whom Christ was led first; whereas it really was before Caiaphas to whom Annas sent him "bound," though it may probably have been only across the same court. Luke adds the distinct shade that the maid spoke of him, and not only to him.

2. Unbelief, if it cannot torture an additional fact in the first denial into a discrepancy, thinks that there is a plain contradiction in the second denial. For Matthew speaks of another maid, Mark of the same maid as before (the portress of John), Luke of "another" but a "man." To all this however John gives the key with moral certainty by his use of the plural — "they said therefore." For thus he clearly shows, even to a doubter, that what each of the three Synoptists says may be all and equally authentic; as the believer is entitled to accept unreservedly without any such demonstration. The two maids and a man may have taken part, in what the fourth Gospel thus sums up. It is plain from Matthew and Mark that the second charge was, in presence of several bystanders on the spot, probably the porch or forecourt whither Peter had gone out, and that Peter's denial was then repeated (ἠρνεῖτο), and not a single act like the first (ἠρνήσατο). Is it not then humiliating to find a scholar like Grotius saying, παιδισκὴ τις. quomodo articulum interdum sumi certum est? And J. Piscator one of the most learned of the early Protestant commentators had said (iii. 143, ed. third) pretty much the same thing before, as others since down to J. G. Rosenmüller, to avoid naming more. But the Greek article is never even

pleonastic, neither can it interchange with the indefinite pronoun. The only natural if not necessary reference is to the same maid as before, though we know from Matthew of another maid also, who joined in the same second charge. Prof. Michaelis is represented in Bowyer's *Conjectures on the New Testament* (Ed. iv. 176) as asking, "Is there no MS. where the article ἡ is wanting?" To this Dr. H. Owen answers, "No MS. yet known omits the article, nor is it necessary that any should. It is apparent, from their own mode of expression compared with that of St. John's, that the three first Evangelists never attended to the order; their point being only to assure us, that Peter denies *our Saviour thrice*. Hence it appears to me that the maid here meant is not the *same* with her that is mentioned in ver. 67, but the principal maid;" etc. No statement can be more rash and baseless as to the neglect of order here in any one of the Gospels, nor had John any superiority over the rest. And as to MSS. the fact is, that out of the vast sum of N.T. Gr. copies, Lambeth 1179,* a cursive of the tenth century, is the only manuscript known to omit the article here. But the object is as plain as the mis-rendering in the Memphitic of Wilkins and the Diez cod., as well as in some of the old Latin copies. The omission therefore must be regarded as a mere slip or, if intended, a fraud; for no sane mind of competent knowledge can question that it is inserted in the genuine readings of the Gospel. Dr. Owen's alternative is even less sound; for there is not the smallest reason to doubt that every one of the Synoptists tallies in the order, and that the points of difference do not clash with the perfect accuracy of each. Fresh facts are in no way an inconsistency,

* It was a MS. brought to England by Prof. J. D. Carlyle at the beginning of this century, who died less than three years after. As Dr. H. Owen died nearly six months before the Cambridge Professor of Arabic got back from abroad, he could not have known of this peculiar reading, which is curious rather than important.

3. Not less must one deplore the misguided efforts of Grotius, Wetstein, as to force Luke into a reluctant repetition of the same thing with Matthew, instead of believing what each says. No scholar doubts that not only in poetry but in prose the masc. is used where one might expect fem., if an indefinite expression be desired as in Acts 9: 37. The object seems rhetorical. What has such a principle to do with the case before us? Nobody would think of any but a male in 58, were it not taken for granted that the third Gospel states afresh what is in the first; but as we have seen, the second differs, and why not the third also? And to conceive that to the maid Peter says γύναι (57), and to "another" or different person he says Ἄνθρωπε, and yet means as before a woman is surely a harsh interpretation for most, if not in ambiguous eyes. The true answer is that the language of John describing the second appeal to Peter is such as admits of all three taking part to the same effect.

4. How painful then to think of sentiments so disparaging to scripture from one who so sincerely sought to understand, explain, and defend it, as Dean Alford in his *Commentary* (i. 283, ed. 5)! — "It would appear to me that, for some reason, John was not so accurately informed of this [the third] as of the other denials." What notions of inspiration a man must have formed to allow himself the use of such language! God is excluded from the scheme, or at least inspiration does not mean His conveying the truth perfectly through chosen instruments. The Holy Spirit who empowered John to write could not but be cognizant of all; and if He undertook to reveal the things of God in words taught of Him, was it left to the precarious will and uncertain mind of the writers employed, or carried out according to His known wisdom? An imperfect standard misleads, so much the more because a standard from God cannot but be accepted and applied with the assurance that it is perfect. That an enemy should impugn the truth of God's word is natural; but if its friends unconsciously yet really undermine its character and authority, by misusing the human channel so as to ignore and deny its exemption from error and the divine purpose which makes it what it is, what can one do but mourn as well as warn? The statement

here (and alas! how common it is in our day) assumes that the differences in the Gospels are the effects of man's weakness and want of accurate information, instead of their variety being the fruit of the Spirit's wisdom in each contributing to a fulness of truth the more wonderful in result.

Even if one only considers the accounts of bare facts, it is John who alone tells us of the leading of the Lord before Annas. It is from him we learn that the maid who first charged the apostle was the portress, and that it was through the other disciple that Peter was let in to the scene of his fall. It is to him we owe the remarkable link which reconciles at one stroke in the simplest and surest way the diverging accounts of the three Synoptists as to the second denial. And he alone lets us know the interesting connection of the slave, wounded of Peter and healed of Christ, with him who was the most pointed of those who drew out the third and most aggravated denial. And this even on human grounds, is the one who "was not so accurately informed!" Never were accounts so evidently above the just imputation of one copying another; never was harmony demonstrably more perfect, without hiding or diminishing but fully unfolding the difference, of each succeeding account. Nor can any fact be more triumphantly apparent, notwithstanding discrepancies to the superficial glance, than their really consenting testimony, the more minutely investigated the better, to the full truth of the story as a whole.

Matthew and Mark alone name Peter's going out into the porch or fore-court. How weak and absurd, not to say irreverent, is the reasoning that John does not seem possessed of this detail, which Luke mentions no more than he! Mark speaks twice of Peter's "warming himself," as John twice of his "standing and warming himself;" but how does it demonstrate that Matthew and Luke knew not this detail?

II. But let me now proceed to draw out the indications that the characteristic manner, in which each of these inspired accounts differ from the rest, has its peculiarity impressed on it by God to serve His distinctively aim, no less than as a whole, without which, it may be added, we could not have the truth as now.

1. In the first Gospel the Spirit traces the Lord as Emmanuel, Jehovah-Messiah, but rejected of the Jew; and consequently the change of dispensation, which brings in the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, and the assembly, but associates the rejected Messiah meanwhile with the despised poor of the flock in Galilee, the pledge of resumed associations with such in the latter day, before the Son of man comes on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Conformably with this, the unquestionable design of the Gospel, we may notice that the account of the denial here brings into prominence Jesus "the Galilean" (69) and "the Nazarene" (71), in the first and second denials, as is implied also of Peter in the third (73). Nor do the other Gospels (save Mark for another reason) so bring out the Messiah disowned by His own disciple before the feeble lips of women, or with such aggravation when others pressed it on the third occasion. Was this coincidence an accident on Matthew's part? or the fruit of the inspiring Spirit's purpose? The last without doubt, the peculiarities of form being due to divine wisdom and truth.

2. Every one at home in the second Gospel knows how devoted Mark is to unfolding the service of the Son of God here below, and the effect of this governing design on all that is omitted as well as inserted from first to last, inclusive of the closing verses which B do not exhibit (to the serious detriment of the true conclusion of the book). The total failure of Peter as a servant is drawn out minutely, as Christ's grace toward him shines on to the end so much the more brightly. Here we see as in John his selfishness and his "evil communications" or "company," and the effect on "good manners." Here as well as in Luke is mentioned the taunt of his Galilean dialect as fixing an unwelcome association on Peter. Here his failure repeated under the pressure first drew out his shame and fear of

confessing Jesus the Nazarene. Here only is noticed the warning of the Lord in its most specific form (Mark 14: 30), and here too its no less specific fulfilment (68, 72). How gracious of the Master! how base in the servant, only to find His goodness still more abundant! Truly, where sin abounded, grace over-abounded! What a contrast the terms of the third denial with his public preaching shortly, to such as these bystanders, of Jesus as a known Saviour and Lord! So is he a self-confident servant to learn of the only Perfect Servant, and by grace become faithful at length. Is all this defect and chance? Or is it divinely purposed? If it can be only of God, learn and cavil not.

3. In Luke we see the Son of man who is Son of God. Perfectly a man He is, the Man in whom the Father delighted, whose delights were with the sons of men. He is the Mediator between God and man, who came into the world to save sinners, Himself the Pattern not only of all that pleased God in dependence and obedience, but of all grace toward all men, Gentiles no less than Jews. Hence, in approaching the case before us, this Gospel alone tells us of Jesus touching the wounded slave's ear and healing him, though all set forth the disciple's misguided zeal. Luke also finishes the account of Peter's fall before he speaks of the preliminary indignities put on the Lord by the priests and elders with their servants, hastens to the council when it was day, and while fully speaking of Pilate, as the rest do, alone lets us know Herod's part in these scenes of cruel impiety.

A maid's steady look and charge sufficed to scare the bold man who failed to believe the word and watch unto prayer. A man takes up the second charge, leaving John alone, it would seem, and setting on Peter, "Thou also art one of them," as indeed began the maid who certainly knew John; for we may reject utterly the assumption that the high priest was too great a personage to have the son of Zebedee for an acquaintance. "A mean fisherman" John was not, though Calvin says it (*ignobilis erat piscator*, Opp. vii. 161, col. i); and even had it been so, how strange to ignore that the proudest may have intimate relations with the lowly for reasons too numerous and patent for a word more to be needed! This notion might justly be called "*levis conjectura*;" and Heumann's hypothesis of Judas Iscariot is, as Alford remarks, too absurd to deserve confutation. But Luke, as all the rest, only supposes this; John alone tells his own tale of shame, as often without naming but the very reverse of concealing himself. Lastly, another unnamed man taxes Peter stoutly (which only receives its explanation in John's Gospel), and, the third denial follows in terms peculiar to Luke and characteristic of him only, who makes "man" so prominent. "While he was yet speaking," says Luke (another touch of his), "a cock crew." But there is added a fresh trait, which could be nowhere else so appropriately as in the Gospel which pre-eminently gives us grace dealing with the heart: "the Lord turned" (for He was in an elevated hall facing His accusers and His back toward Peter in the courtyard), "and looked on Peter, and Peter called" etc. The mind that could conceive these differences to be mistakes, or even thrown by hazard into the Gospels where they are, might consistently imagine the world to be the result of a concourse of atoms. And yet Dean Alford is but one of a class of well-meaning men who have so little faith in scripture as to say, without the least thought of impropriety, that "the trial he (Luke) omits altogether, having found no report of it!" What "report" had he of the agony in Gethsemane, though he alone tells us of an angel appearing to strengthen Him, when His sweat became as great drops of blood? He might have had Matthew's Gospel and Mark's long enough before Him without that of which there could be no reporter; for who of men was there to see or hear? Oh! how grievous is the unbelief of believers.

4. But surely believers are not blind to the divine character of John's presentation of things here as everywhere. Alas! it is not only Dean Alford who, we saw, apologises for John's lack of accurate information; nor is it only men like Olshausen, Wieseler, Tischendorf, speak of a contradiction! between the Synoptists and John as to the locality of the denial. Living writers of eminence hint at a

confusion in our Evangelist's account owing to the excitement of a popular ferment. Happily inspiration, though it may use, is independent of, sight or hearing as well as report and information. And what evidence of divinely impressed design can be plainer or more conclusive, than that John, nearer to the Lord than any of the Synoptists during His agony, does not relate it; and that, none of these, not even Matthew, tells us how the band all went backward and fell to the ground before Him who was the Son, as surely as Jesus the Nazarene.

It is a pleasure to cite Calvin here, more right than he, is sometimes on the difficulties of unbelief: even here one might wish a stronger faith and a deeper reverence. He says (*ibid.*) that John was not too eager ("curiosus," which Mr. Pringle, in the Edinburgh Translation Series, was not justified in rendering "very exact") in drawing up the history; because he is satisfied with framing a brief summary. "For after relating that Peter once denied Christ, he intermingles other matters, and then returns to the other two denials. Hence inattentive readers inferred that the first denial took place in Annas' house. No such thing however do the words convey, which rather state clearly that it was the high priest's maid who drove Peter to deny Christ." And Calvin reads ver. 24 as a parenthesis, correcting the idea that the narrative in 19-23 was of what took place at Annas', and explaining that it was before the high priest, Caiaphas. This is the inattention that led Dean Alford after others to deny the bearing of ἀπέστειλεν "sent" in 24; for its quasi-pluperfect force is contextual simply, which is quite notorious in temporal subordinate sentences, and not only in relative, but independent sentences if they contain some supplementary notice, which is exactly the fact here.

Annas, the ex-high-priest, soon high-priest again (for all was out of course), is very briefly introduced to mark how completely the Son of God was rejected. Before, Caiaphas was the interrogator while Peter denied his Master; and the tone is here no more different as compared with the other three Gospels than is always found. There is no solid ground for imagining the portress to have charged Peter immediately after entry. It was really at the fire, as in other Gospels. All is open and general in the account of John. And the second denial, so far from being a difficulty, we have seen to be the solution of the difficulties which hasty minds found in the Synoptists; as the third sheds an important light on Luke and indeed all the rest, in the keen asseveration of Malchus' kinsman, who with the rest might yet more alarm the guilty apostle's mind. Oh! the sad spectacle of Peter, and even John drawn by his own hand in the power of the Spirit, where Jesus stands alone in the majesty of grace and truth, immeasurably superior to all who presumed to judge Him, where His own who ought to have received Him are manifestly and immensely worse than the most hardened of Gentiles, and seal God's judgment on their infidel declaration that "We have no King but Caesar." Now which of the Evangelists has the function of bringing this out habitually? John, who here does so above all.

Unbelief then is as inexcusable as it is blind. "By faith we understand."