

John 18:15-18

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Peter's First Denial of Jesus

Peter manages to enter into the court of Annas where Jesus's preliminary trial was taking place. While Peter is there, he denies being a follower of Jesus to a slave girl.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Matthew 26:69-71; Mark 14:66-68; and Luke 22:54b-57.

The main event in this passage is the first of *Peter's* three denials of *Jesus*.

Peter's first denial most likely took place on the night of Nisan 15 (the dark hours of Friday morning by Roman reckoning) in the courtyard of Annas, the former high priest, as *Jesus's* preliminary religious trial was underway inside his home.

See "[The Bible Says Timeline of Jesus's Final 24 Hours](#)" to learn more about the timing and sequencing of this event.

Following His submission to arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:1-11), *Jesus* was taken to the home of Annas for His preliminary religious trial (John 18:12-14). Before John narrates the events of *Jesus's* preliminary trial, he explains what happened to *Simon Peter* while the preliminary trial took place.

This commentary will be subdivided into two sections:

- **THE BACKSTORY OF PETER'S THREE DENIALS**
- **PETER'S FIRST DENIAL**

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THE BACKSTORY OF PETER'S THREE DENIALS

To understand the significance of this moment it may be beneficial to recall three moments from earlier that evening.

1. **Jesus's Predictions and Peter's Promise**

The first moment to recall was when *Jesus* informed *Peter* that he would deny Him three times before a rooster crows twice, and *Peter's* promise that he would die for *Jesus* and never deny him (Mark 14:30).

It seems that *Jesus* may have even warned *Peter* of this twice that night, and both times *Peter* vehemently rejected His Lord's shameful prophecy of his imminent denial.

Jesus's initial warning occurred during the Upper Room Discourse that followed *Jesus*'s Seder meal with His *disciples* celebrating the Passover. During that conversation, the *disciples* argued about which among them was the greatest (Luke 22:24). *Jesus* reminded them about true greatness being rooted in service (Luke 22:25-29) and commanded them to love one another (John 13:31-35).

At which point *Peter* interjected: "Lord, where are You going?" (John 13:36).

Jesus responded: "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later" (John 13:36b).

Peter then said: "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? (John 13:37a)

Jesus then likely responded to *Peter*'s promise: "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 rejected his Lord's suggestion that he would falter: "Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!" (Luke 22:33); and "I will lay down my life for You" (John 13:37b).

Then *Jesus* plainly predicted: "I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me" (Luke 22:34). John's Gospel prefaces *Jesus*'s prediction with Him asking His wounded *disciple*: "Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times" (John 13:38).

Peter was silent.

And it seems this conversation repeated itself as *Jesus* and His *disciples* walked from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane.

As they travelled across Jerusalem and through the gates that evening, *Jesus* predicted that all of His *disciples* would fall away that night as foretold by the prophets (Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27).

Peter then disputed *Jesus*: "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away" (Matthew 26:33; see also Mark 14:29).

Jesus then repeated His specific prediction: "Truly I say to you, that this very night, before a rooster crows twice, you yourself will deny Me three times" (Mark 14:30; see also Matthew 26:34).

But *Peter* "kept saying insistently, 'Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!'" (Mark 14:31; see also Matthew 26:35).

From these predictions and denials, it is clear *Jesus* knows that *Peter* will deny Him three times before the rooster crows twice. It is also clear *Peter* firmly believes that he is ready to die for *Jesus* and that he will not deny his Lord.

2. Praying and Sleeping in the Gethsemane

The second moment that could be helpful to recall was when *Jesus* and His *disciples* arrived at the Garden of Gethsemane. Upon their arrival, *Jesus* was deeply troubled by what He was about to undergo (Matthew 26:37). *Jesus* took with Him *Peter*, James, and John and asked them to “remain here and keep watch with Me” (Matthew 26:38; see also Mark 14:34). More specifically, what *Jesus* asked *Peter* and the other *disciples* to do was to “pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Luke 22:40).

Jesus knew He would soon be arrested, unjustly condemned, tortured, crucified to bear the sins of the world, and be buried for three days. He dreaded this for Himself and needed to ask God for strength to faithfully endure the trial. *Jesus* also knew this experience would be incredibly difficult for His *disciples* to endure. It would shake their faith and they would fall unless they relied on God, as He relied on God. Therefore, He asked *Peter* and the other *disciples* to pray that they may not succumb to the temptation to rely on their own will and resolve or to fall into despair when they saw what happened to *Jesus*.

But three times, *Jesus* came and found *Peter*, James, and John sleeping instead of praying (Matthew 26:40-45; Mark 14:37-41; Luke 22:45-46). At one point *Jesus* woke *Peter* up and said: “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:37b-38).

There seems to be a connection, thematic if nothing else, between the **three times** *Peter* fell asleep while praying in Gethsemane and the **three times** *Peter* denied *Jesus*. When the risen *Jesus* personally forgives *Peter* and restores him beside the shore at Galilee to his kingdom calling, the Lord asks *Peter* **three times** “Do you love me?” (John 21:15-17).

From this moment in Gethsemane, it seems apparent that *Peter* did not spend the night praying for God’s strength to help him overcome the trial coming swiftly upon him. Instead, he slept and relied on his own will.

3. Jesus’s Arrest and Peter’s Attack

The third moment of significance preceding *Peter*’s denials was when the Jewish authorities and Roman cohort arrived to arrest *Jesus* (Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-50; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:2-11). As they came to seize *Jesus*, *Peter* made good on his promise that he was willing to die with *Jesus*, in that he immediately began to fight. *Peter* drew his sword and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his ear (John 18:10; see also Matthew 26:51; Mark 14:46-47; Luke 22:49-50).

Jesus immediately intervened, commanding *Peter* to stop, and healed the servant's ear; thus, saving *Peter's* life (Matthew 26:52; Luke 22:51; John 18:11).

At this point, *Jesus* freely submitted to His captors (Luke 22:53).

Confused that *Jesus* had given Himself up without a fight, all His *disciples* fled (Matthew 26:56b; Mark 14:50), just as He had predicted they would do.

From this episode it is apparent that the *disciples*, especially *Peter*, were all willing to die for *Jesus*, just as they had promised within their chosen perspective. They all expected *Jesus* to eventually seize political power from Rome. Thus, their commitment to die for Him came with the caveat that their death would be on their terms. *Peter* and the *disciples* were all willing to die for *Jesus* as long as He fit into their expectations for Him. But they were not willing to die for Him (i.e. follow Him) on His terms.

Moreover, *Peter* and the *disciples* were acting in their own strength. They had limited understanding of *Jesus* and His mission, which required Him to die for the sins of the world and to be raised back to life by God. Even though *Jesus* had told them this plainly, they had been unable to hear. They continued to rely on their own understanding instead of trusting God by faith. In other words, they had fallen into the temptation that *Jesus* repeatedly asked them to pray and prepare for when they first entered Gethsemane.

PETER'S FIRST DENIAL

After *Jesus* submitted to arrest, His captors brought Him to the home of Annas, the former high priest for His preliminary religious trial (John 18:12-14).

Meanwhile, *Simon Peter* was following *Jesus*, and so was another *disciple* (v 15a).

Matthew's Gospel tells us that *Peter* followed the arresting party "at a distance" so as not to get noticed or caught; he wanted "to see the outcome" (Matthew 26:58).

Then—*another disciple*—that John mentions is presumably himself. John frequently refers to himself in his Gospel indirectly in the third person, and this is likely another instance of his signature pattern. If this unnamed *disciple* was in fact John, the author, it would account for how the writer knew these specific details so intimately.

All three of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) state that *Peter* got as far as "the courtyard of the high priest" (Matthew 26:58; Mark 14:54; see also Luke 22:55), but only John's Gospel explains how *Peter* got in.

Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with *Jesus* into the court of the high priest, but *Peter* was standing at the door outside. So the other *disciple*, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought *Peter* in. (v 15b-16).

John explains that the unnamed *disciple* (himself) *was known to the high priest*. This expression likely means he personally knew someone in *the high priest's* household or staff rather than Annas, *the former high priest*, or Caiaphas, *the current high priest* at that time.

The staff member that the unnamed *disciple* knew and was *known to* was apparently *the door keeper*. Because John, the unnamed *disciple* was *known to the door keeper* of *the high priest* he was allowed inside; and he *entered with Jesus* and His captors *into the court of the high priest*.

But Peter was not known by this high priest's household and was left waiting outside, standing at the door. Peter seems to have lingered there, trying to glimpse inside until John noticed him, and *went out and spoke to the door keeper, and then brought Peter in*.

John's personal familiarity with *the door keeper* not only allowed himself and *Peter* a front row seat to what happened at *Jesus's* trials, it also helps explain how he knew the name of *the high priest's* servant whose ear *Peter* cut off. The servant's name was "Malchus" (John 18:10). John's Gospel is the only Gospel that identifies this servant by name.

As *Peter* was *warming himself*, huddled near the *fire with the high priest's slaves and the temple officers*, the *fire's* glow shown upon his face (v 18) (Luke 22:56).

Then the slave-girl who kept the door said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not" (v 17).

From a cultural perspective, *a slave-girl who kept the door* would have been held in low esteem by *the officers* around her. According to Jewish law, even a free-woman's testimony held no validity in the court of law. But when she saw and recognized *Peter*, she accused him of being one of *Jesus*, the hated prisoner's, followers (Matthew 26:69; Mark 14:67; Luke 22:56). In John's Gospel the accusation is framed not as a statement, but as a question:

You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?

The implied or assumed answer to the *slave-girl's* question was "Yes, I am one of this accused man's disciples."

But instead of answering truthfully, *Peter* flatly answered: *I am not*.

Peter answered untruthfully and in a manner that was cowardly. This was quite a statement coming from *one of Jesus's* closest *disciples*, not to mention *one* who so boldly *said he* would never deny *Jesus*, but stated in the most emphatic terms that he would die for Him.

Luke captures *Peter's* first denial this way: "Woman, I do not know Him" (Luke 22:57).

It seems apparent that *Peter* denied His Lord because *he* was afraid of what would happen to him if the officers knew him to be *one of Jesus's disciples*. Most particularly because he cut off the servant's ear *Peter* could be arrested, abused, and killed like *Jesus*. A few minutes before, *Peter*

was ready to fight, kill, and die for *Jesus* (John 18:10), but after *Jesus* surrendered to His enemies, *Peter* was fearful because his confidence and faith had been shaken.

Perhaps *Peter* had misplaced his faith in his own abilities and understanding rather than God's. *He* was so afraid that *he* denied being *one of Jesus's disciples* to a lowly servant girl, whose testimony was culturally regarded as worthless.

In Matthew's recounting of *Peter's* first denial, he uses a form of the Greek word οἶδα (G1492 – pronounced: "oi'-dah) that is translated "know" for *Peter's* remark to the *slave-girl* "I do not know what you are talking about" (Matthew 26:70). The word "oidah", describes theoretical knowledge. "Oidah" is different from the other common Greek word for "I know" which is γινώσκω (G1097 – pronounced "ghin-ōs-kō"). "Ghinōskō" describes relational or experiential knowledge or familiarity.

By denying that *he* knows ("oidahs") *Jesus*, *Peter* is implying that *he* knows little to nothing about Him. To say *he* did not "ginōskō" *Jesus*, would mean that *Peter* may have talked with *Him* once or twice, but that was not a real follower of *Jesus*. But to say that *he* did not "Oidah" *Jesus* implied that *Peter* knew nothing of *Jesus* at all and/or had never interacted with Him. Therefore *Peter's* "oidah" denial was much stronger and more absolute denial than if *he* had merely said *he* did not "ghinōskō" *Jesus*.

This strength of this denial is felt in Mark's version of *Peter's* first denial: "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about" (Mark 14:68).

After stating the main action, John describes what *Peter* was doing when *the slave-girl* asked him the question.

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 (v 18).

The other Gospels all say something similar, namely that *Peter* was near a fire in the middle of the courtyard among the captors and accusers of *Jesus* when a *slave girl* approached and accused *him* of being *one of Jesus's* followers. Which *Peter* denied.

This was the first occasion that *Peter* broke his promises from earlier that night to never deny *Jesus* (Matthew 26:33, 35; Mark 14:29, 31). It was also the first fulfillment of what *Jesus* told *Peter* *he* would do, before the rooster crowed (Matthew 26:34; Mark 14:30; Luke 22:34; John 13:38).

A "little later" (Luke 22:58), *Peter* would deny *Jesus* two more times, this time in the courtyard of Caiaphas (John 18:24-27). But first John reveals what took place during *Jesus's* preliminary trial in the home of *Annas*, *the former high priest* (John 18:19-24).

[To see Peter's second and third denials from the perspective of John go to the Bible Says commentary page for John 18:25-27.](#)

[To see all three of Peter's denials from the perspective of Matthew go to the Bible Says commentary page for Matthew 26:69-75.](#)

Biblical Text

¹⁵ Simon Peter was following Jesus, and so was another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, ¹⁶ but Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷ Then the slave-girl who kept the door said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." ¹⁸ 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.