

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Steps to Peter's Defection**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 26:31-75

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

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Our journey through Passion Week from the book of Matthew brings us this morning to what was surely one of the most painful moments in Jesus' life—the defection and denial of one of His dearest friends, Peter. Some of you have heard parts of this message before, as three years ago I used this passage and outline as a brief meditation for a Good Friday service. But I trust you will indulge me the privilege of repeating a few things today as we seek to follow the events of Passion Week without leaving anything out.

Peter's Jewish name was Simon Barjona. That last name simply means “son of John,” for “bar” in Hebrew means “son” as in “Bar mitzvah” (Son of the Law). If he were Scandinavian his last name would have been John's Son or “Johnson.” His first name was Simon, at least until Jesus got hold of him. Then he was renamed “Petros.” In English we have transliterated his name as Peter, but if we were to translate it instead it would be “Rocky,” a handle which conveys manhood, strength, ruggedness, and stability. In the vernacular Peter's name would have been Rocky Johnson.

Unfortunately people don't always live up to their names. If you need proof of that, the name Michael means, “one who is like God.” It was Shakespeare who said, “What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” But that's not quite true. I think I have mentioned before that one of the most popular and tasty fish on the market today is orange roughy, but it did not become popular until some marketing expert gave it a new name—it was originally known as “slimehead.” And for some reason it just didn't sell.

In the first century names almost always conveyed something important about the person. I think we can be sure that was the case when Jesus did the naming. Yet our Scripture passage today would certainly make one think that Jesus blew it when he named Peter “Rocky,” for few people in history have shown themselves to be less manly and more cowardly than he in Luke 22. In fact, if the name “Judas” had not already been taken, it would have suited Peter well.

This is a man who had walked with Jesus for 3½ years as one of the Twelve, who had been a member of His inner circle of three, who had been with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration; and on whom Jesus said He was planning to build His church. Yet this same Peter, as Jesus was being arraigned on trumped-up charges, denied three times that he even knew who Jesus was, when identified as a disciple by a little servant girl.

How could this have happened? Did he just flip out on the spur of the moment? Did he have a panic attack and experience temporary insanity? Was it a totally isolated incident with no warning signals? I don't think so. Betrayal rarely is. I want to suggest to you that Peter's defection is not only understandable but almost inevitable if we look at the steps that led up to it.

And the purpose in pointing this out is to remind ourselves that tragic sin in our own lives is almost always preceded by specific identifiable steps of failure. If we can be on the lookout for those steps, perhaps we can prevent the spiritual meltdown that so often follows.

But I have another purpose in this sermon—and that is to say that there is hope for anyone who has defected, because before the last chapter of his life was written, Peter experienced an amazing transformation and redemption. And you can, too!

I believe there were at least five steps that led to Peter's defection. I am indebted to Dr. Howard Hendricks, who was one of my profs in seminary, for pointing out four of these and I have added two others:

He boasted too much.

He prayed too little.

He acted too soon.

He followed too far (behind). And

He remembered too late.

But thankfully Jesus loved him too much to discard him.

See if you can pick these steps out as we read from Matthew 26, beginning in verse 31 through most of the rest of the chapter:

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written:

"I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."

But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him.

Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for."

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"

At that time Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

We'll skip down to verse 69 since next week our whole sermon will be on the arrest and trials of Jesus.

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said.

But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."

He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!"

After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away."

Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!"

Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Peter boasted too much. (31-35)

We have seen Peter's tendency toward self-confidence earlier in our study of Matthew, but he

really outdoes himself in the opening verses of our passage today. In response to Jesus' warning (more than a warning, actually a prophecy!) that all of the Twelve will desert Him, Peter replies, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." But then Jesus speaks specifically to Peter and predicts that he will disown Him three times that very night before the rooster crows.

But Peter is adamant and responds that such a failure on his part is unthinkable. He postulates the worst possible scenario: "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." The original language actually contains a double negative: "I will not (n)ever disown you." And, Matthew tells us, all the other disciples said the same thing.

Oh, how easy it is to become overconfident. 1 Cor. 10:12 has Peter's name written all over it: "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." But does it not have ours as well? I'm always troubled when I hear someone say, "That's one sin I would never commit." Or, "that's a habit I'd never start." I've just seen too many cases, in my own life included, where things which seemed totally beyond a person's character actually happened. Satan works overtime trying to trip up self-confident Christians.

He prayed too little. (36-46)

It shouldn't be surprising to find overconfidence and prayerlessness in the same person. A person's confidence cannot lie in himself and in Christ at the same time. We see the evidence of this as Jesus goes with His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. He takes Peter, James and John aside, then asks them to keep watch while He goes a little further to pray. When He returns He finds them sleeping. With more sorrow than rebuke in His voice, He addresses Peter, "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?"

This time Jesus asks them not just to watch, but to "Watch *and pray* so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." (verse 41). Then he goes beyond them 20 or 30 yards (Luke says "a stone's throw") and pours out His heart to the Father. So anguished is He that an angel has to come and strengthen Him and His sweat becomes like drops of blood (Luke 22:43-44). But when He gets up from prayer and goes back to the disciples, He once again finds them asleep.

A third time He warns them to watch and pray while He goes to pray by Himself. And a third time He finds them in the same condition: "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" Imagine! They have whiled away their last hours with Christ by sleeping.

But before we point fingers perhaps we ought to ask how often we've fallen asleep while praying or, worse yet, fallen asleep *without* praying.

He acted too soon. (47-56)

Beginning in verse 47 we have a brief account of the actual betrayal of Jesus by Judas and the Savior's arrest. When the crowd steps forward to seize Jesus we read in verse 51 that "one of

Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear." Which one of the disciples do you suppose did that? If you guessed Peter, you're right. John 18:10 identifies Peter as the agent and Malchus as the victim.

Now frankly I sort of admire Peter's courage here, if not his wisdom. Faced with several hundred soldiers armed to the teeth, Peter pulls out a little dagger and attempts to defend Jesus. But being a better fisherman than swordsman, he misses splitting the guy's head open and instead only slices his ear off. Courage to spare, but He has entirely missed the point of something Jesus had said to them just hours before. Listen to Luke 22:35-38, where Jesus is addressing His disciples sometime between the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane:

"Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" They acknowledged that all their needs had been met. "But now," Jesus says, "if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one." And the disciples said, "See, Lord, here are two swords." "That is enough," he replied.

What is this all about? The medieval papacy interpreted the two swords as the sword of religious power and the sword of political power. Both belonged to the Church, according to Pope Boniface the VIII. His mistake was that he completely spiritualized Jesus' words, but the disciples' mistake was that they took His words too literally. Malchus lost his ear apparently because Peter interpreted Jesus' words as encouraging him to take up a literal sword.

But I believe Jesus is simply trying to tell His disciples in a symbolic way that their internship is over; it's now straight commission time. They are heading into a spiritual battle like they've never seen before. And because the sword is a *symbol* of warfare and conflict, Jesus tells them to "sell your coat and buy one." In other words, He is saying, "Get ready for the spiritual battle ahead."

But they respond, "Hey, Lord, we've got two swords. Here's Peter's and here's another." They expect a pat on the back, or at most, instructions to go and get a few more swords. But instead Jesus says, "That is enough." In English these words are ambiguous and could signify approval, but the Greek is not ambiguous. Jesus' words are actually an expression of resignation. He is really saying, "Enough! You guys haven't understood a word I've said and you probably won't until it's too late."

Within hours of that interaction Peter whips out his sword and uses it on the poor servant. But Jesus turns to Peter and says, "Put your sword back in its place." Luke alone tells us that Jesus touches the man's ear and heals it. There is no need for literal swords in this spiritual battle. That's not Christ's way.

Actually, there's a bit more to the story. Matthew records Jesus exhorting Peter: "All who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" Jesus isn't helpless! He doesn't need Peter's pitiful help. Thousands of angels stand instantaneously at His disposal.

Have you recently gotten impatient and tried to fight God's battles for Him? Are you constantly running ahead of Him trying to solve problems that might not even be problems if you would just wait on the Lord? I think one of the most difficult issues in the Christian life is to determine when we should act and when we should wait. Certainly there are times when, as the saying goes, "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." On the other hand it's not unusual for good men to make matters a lot worse by acting prematurely. We certainly need discernment as to when God would have us act. Peter didn't have that discernment; he clearly acted too soon.

Peter, however, isn't always running ahead of the Lord; sometimes he lags behind, significantly behind. We see this as the fourth step to Peter's defection:

He followed too far (behind). (57-58, 69-74a)

When Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane His enemies lead him away to the house of Caiaphas the high priest. Peter wants desperately to know what is happening, but he doesn't want to be known. Verse 58 says, "Peter followed him at a distance." When Peter finally enters the courtyard he tries to keep a low profile among the men who are warming themselves by the fire.

There are many like Peter today. They legitimately and sincerely follow Jesus, but they follow afar off. They do not want to become too "fanatical" or "lose touch" with the world that surrounds them. They think they are safer at a distance, though they are actually in greater danger. When Jesus calls a person to follow Him, He calls him or her to follow in His footsteps.

Surely you have had the experience of walking on the sand, following someone else's footsteps. If so, you are aware that your ability to follow those steps is generally in direct proportion to how close you are to the one who made the footprints. The farther back in space or time, the more likely the footsteps are to be blurred by the shifting winds or the waves of the sea. The place to be really safe, even in the midst of the battle, is next to Jesus.

But Peter follows too far behind, and you know the rest of the story. A little slave-girl in the courtyard thinks she recognizes him as one of Jesus' disciples, but he denies it: "I don't know what you're talking about." A little later out by the gateway another girl spots him and points a finger, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." To which he answers with an oath, "I don't know the man." Quickly he moves into the shadows. But about an hour later a third person (John tells us this third one to identify Peter was a relative of Malchus, whose ear Peter lopped off a few hours before) asserts, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." And in his best effort to imitate a Judean accent rather than a Galilean one, Peter responds, "I don't know the man." Matthew tells us he included curse on himself and swore, no doubt with oaths learned as a life-long sailor.

The last step in Peter's defection is seen at the end of verse 74 and 75:

He remembered too late. (74b-75)

“Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.” Luke gives us one additional bit of information that helps explain the bitter weeping. He says, “The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered” (Luke 22:61).

Oh that we could remember before it’s too late what our parents have taught us, what our Sunday School teachers have tried to build into our lives, what we have read in God’s Word, what we have seen in other people’s lives, good and bad. That’s the message of Ecclesiastes 12: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, ‘I find no pleasure in them.’”

God always gives us ample warning before we fall. If you read this whole story very carefully from all four Gospels you will find that Jesus not only predicted that a rooster would crow before Peter denied Him but that the rooster would crow twice before Peter denied Him three times. And sure enough, as we learn in Mark 14 the rooster crowed once after the first denial. It was as though Jesus was saying to Peter, “Did you hear it? You have only one more chance.” But he remembers too late. And Luke tells us that the shame causes him to go outside and weep bitterly.

Peter is not mentioned again in any of the Gospels until after the resurrection. This is probably the longest period of silence—three days—known in the life of Peter. I feel certain that part of the reason is the sorrow that must have filled his heart when just a few hours after his denial Jesus was hung upon a cross and crucified. I only ask you to imagine the emotions that would overcome any of us if we had to watch our best friend die an excruciating death after we had turned our backs on him.

Most of us, if we were in Jesus’ shoes, would have abandoned Peter. After all, just think of the tremendous investment of time and effort that had gone into Peter. Well, Jesus does consider the time and effort and because of that, but even more because of His great love, He decides that Peter is worth salvaging. Though Peter boasted too much, prayed too little, acted too soon, followed too far behind, and remembered too late, yet Jesus loved him too much to discard him.

But Jesus loved him too much to discard him. (Luke 22:31-32, Acts 4:8-13)

In Luke’s account of this sad event he includes a brief conversation between Jesus and Peter that is not found in the other Gospels (it occurred between the Last Supper and Gethsemane. Jesus says, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32). Someone has suggested that Peter is the NT counterpart to Job in the OT. You will recall that Satan came to God and asked for permission to test Job, claiming that the only reason Job was faithful is that God had bought him off. Now we find Satan coming and asking permission to test a NT servant of God. I would assume from the prominence of these incidents

that Satan always has to get permission from God before launching an attack on one of God's children. The benefit of knowing this is that it reminds us that God is ultimately in control. Even when we are under Satanic attack, still the boundaries have been set by our heavenly Father.

Did you notice that Jesus doesn't call him Rocky here in Luke 22; He reverts to his old name, Simon. But Jesus is still committed to helping him become a rock. After His resurrection Jesus spent 40 days here on earth before His ascension, and much of that time was spent with Peter. And the effort began to pay off. Peter emerges on the other side of the resurrection and ascension with a holy boldness not based in self but in the power of the risen Christ. His excesses are channeled into usefulness and his liabilities converted into assets.

The cowardly Peter a few hours before the crucifixion becomes a bold preacher afterwards, one who could stand up to governmental and church leaders and say, "You are God-killers and you must repent."

The self-confident Peter the night before the crucifixion becomes one whose confidence is squarely in Christ. In the first chapter of his first epistle he prays, "that our faith and hope may be in God."

The prayerless Peter who preferred sleep to watchfulness becomes one who knew the necessity of open channels of prayer. In 1 Peter 4:7 he wrote, "The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray."

And the Peter whom Jesus called "Satan" becomes a holy man warning others about "the devil who prowls around seeking whom he may devour."

Conclusion: Peter is my kind of guy. I think the reason I am attracted to him is that I am so much like him—impetuous, sometimes mouthy, faithless at crucial moments, but still considered valuable to the God who loved me and gave His Son to die for me.

There are two dastardly deeds unveiled in this passage—a betrayal and a denial. And there are some startling similarities between Judas and Peter. Both were disciples of Jesus for over three years, both held privileged positions as apostles, and both sinned grievously by turning their backs upon Jesus.

But there is also a major difference between them. Judas felt remorse and went out and hanged himself (chapter 27), entering a Christless eternity because there was no substance to his faith. Peter, on the other hand, repented of his heinous sin, sought the forgiveness of God and went forward to demonstrate the reality of his faith in a powerful way. The difference between remorse and repentance is going to be our topic in two weeks.

Today I ask those true Christians who have sinned grievously, who haven't lived up to that glorious name "Christian," who have failed Christ at some critical moment, to turn to Him for forgiveness and dedicate yourself anew to a life of true discipleship. God in His grace is able to

restore you to a place of usefulness, and to work into your life the same kind of amazing transformation He did for Rocky Johnson. It may require coming to the end of yourself, even some bitter weeping, certainly repentance. But God is able.

Benediction: 2 Peter 3:17,18: “Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen!”