

Peter's Fall -- Mark 14:66-72

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer.

Father, may Jesus now be lifted up as the crucified, risen, and soon-coming Savior. May we be so enamored with Him that our thoughts, words, and actions compel others to believe in Him as their Savior. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

There are many amazing stories of people who survived some extreme falls. Many involve airplane crashes. A documentary recently came out entitled, "Sole Survivor", which interviewed four people who were the lone survivors in a major plane crash. One of those survivors was Cecelia Cichan (Shee-hun). It was August 16, 1987. Northwest Airlines flight 255 took off from the Detroit Metro Airport at 8:46 PM bound for Phoenix, Arizona. The plane lifted off the runway going 195 mph. Approximately 50 feet off of the ground, the airplane began to roll from side to side, stalling out. Hitting a light pole, a large part of the left wing was broken off. After hitting the roof of a building, it crashed onto a road and burst into flames upon impact with two overpasses, one for a railroad and the other an interstate. Out of 149 passengers, only Cecelia Cichan survived. She was only four years old. Cecelia is now grown and married. In a recent documentary she says that she is not afraid to fly.

In our story from Mark 14 Peter experienced a different kind of fall. Just as with Cecilia, it was a miracle that he survived.

Here is a summary of our story:

During Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, a servant girl twice identified Peter as one of Jesus' disciples. But both times Peter denied it. When others approached Peter a third time and classified him as Jesus' disciple, he denied even knowing who Jesus was. But when he heard the rooster crow, Peter remembered Jesus' words predicting his denial and began to weep.

Let's take a closer look at the experiences of Peter. First of all, he experienced mingling with the crowd. The setting is Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin in the courtyard of the high priest, Caiaphas. If we look back a few verses to Mark 14:54, we find that Peter was present at this trial and had taken his seat with the servants, warming himself by the fire. Verse 66 identifies a "servant girl". Another translation here would be "female slave". This young lady would have been at the bottom of the cultural ladder. As a woman she had very few rights, but as a slave, even those few rights had been taken away from her. In John's account of this story we find that this "servant girl" was the same one who had let Peter into the courtyard at John's request (John 18:17).

Secondly, Peter experienced being identified with Jesus. For the last three years this had not been a problem for Peter. But on this night something had changed. Being with Jesus was no longer popular. Peter was pointed out three successive times that night. First, in Mark 14:67 the servant girl spoke to Peter. The second time, she spoke of him to those who stood by (Mark 14:69). The third time those who stood by spoke to Peter (Mark 14:70). Their clue was that Peter was a Galilean. How did they know that he was a Galilean? Galilee was north of Judea, where Jerusalem was. The difference between Judea and Galilee would be like the difference between suburban Columbus and the Appalachian areas of Ohio. Language and culture were significantly different in these areas. So Peter would have had a distinctive accent from those who lived in Jerusalem.

Third, Peter experienced denying Jesus. In Mark 14:68 a paraphrase of his response to the servant girl might be, "I don't know what you're talking about." He blew her off. In the book, Desire of Ages page 710, though, you will discover that Peter's initial response was to be "startled and confused". He apparently was trying to go unnoticed. Being pointed out like that caught him off guard. Following the servant girl's second comment, Peter repeated his earlier denial. Following the third time of being identified as one of Jesus' followers, Peter stepped up his denial with stronger words. Mark 14:71 says he began to curse and swear. After researching

the language and culture of this society, however, I'm not sure that we can equate the cursing and swearing of our day with that of Peter's. The words reveal Peter binding himself under an oath. A possible equivalent in our day might be, "I swear to God", or to put one's hand on the Bible in an oath.

Turn with me to Matthew 5:33-37. These are the words of Jesus. (Read) Peter not only violated the common teaching of the religious leaders. He also violated Jesus' teaching on swearing and taking oaths. In spite of Peter's oaths and outburst, it is unlikely that those standing by were impressed. I somehow don't think that they were convinced against their will. They were probably thinking of Peter, "What's wrong with you?" When you have chosen the way of deception, forceful words and a passionate tone of voice avail little. It is better to stick with the truth.

Fourth, Peter experienced conviction. Some English translations leave it out, but Mark 14:72 actually begins with the word, "Immediately". As soon as Peter had finished his rant, the rooster crowed a second time. Peter hadn't heard it the first time in verse 68. But he did this time. The sound of the rooster suddenly took his thoughts back to Jesus' words earlier that night, predicting that Peter would deny Him three times before the rooster crowed two times. Once Peter's thoughts were brought back to Jesus' prediction, he began to rehearse the events of that night. It may have been like hitting fast forward on an old VHS tape and watching everything race at high speed. (Sports lovers might identify with instant replay.) I remember watching the film "Prince of Egypt" where Moses discovered his Hebrew roots. He raced from one place to another looking at various paintings on the walls. And he suddenly connected the dots. His identity changed from being Egyptian (an identity rooted in tyranny) to being Hebrew (an identity among those in affliction).

When Peter connected the dots and realized that he had sworn falsely against God's own Son, he began to weep out loud. The enormity of his sin, the depths of his fall, overwhelmed him. According to the book, Desire of Ages, page 713, Peter rushed away from the courtyard and eventually ended up back in Gethsemane where Jesus had wept tears of blood in His agony.

We are now going to proceed as investigators following a plane crash. They ask the critical question, "What went wrong?" As we search for the cause of Peter's fall, let's begin with a brief history of Peter's relationship with Jesus. In Mark 1:16 Jesus chose him as one of His first disciples. Mark 2:1 reveals that a particular house where Jesus stayed in Capernaum. Many scholars believe this was Peter's house. Three different times in Mark's record, Jesus had hand-picked Peter to be in an inner circle of three. (Each time involved a special experience that only those closest to Jesus were allowed to witness. Mark 5:37 involved the raising of a ruler's daughter from the dead. Mark 9:2 was the time when Jesus was transfigured in glory on a mountain top. Mark 14:33 was Jesus' time of agony in Gethsemane.) Several passages in the book of Mark reveal Peter as a leader among the twelve disciples, often speaking on their behalf (Mark 8:27-29; 9:5; 10:28). On two particular occasions Peter had revealed complete dedication to Jesus and His ministry while at the same time being at complete odds with Jesus as to what His ministry was all about. In Mark 8:31-32 he had told Jesus that no one would ever arrest Him or put Him to death. In Mark 14:31, 47 Peter backed this up by putting his own life on the line. His comprehension was questionable. But his devotion and closeness to Jesus were not. Thanks to his upbringing in the Jewish culture, he had a misconception about Jesus' purpose as the Messiah. He looked for Christ to bring the Jews worldly power and position. But in spite of this confusion, Peter was drawn in by Jesus' love. He became one of Jesus' most loyal followers.

So what caused Peter to have such a tragic fall? Where did he fail? He clearly wanted first dibs on the power and position that were thought to come with being one of Jesus' closest followers. But so did the other eleven disciples (Mark 9:33-37). Why did only Peter have such a tragic fall? He was self-confident. But so were the other eleven (Mark 14:27-31). He slept in Gethsemane (instead of praying). But so did the other disciples (Mark 14:32-42). Peter was unprepared for Jesus' arrest. It was not what he had expected. But such was the case with the other eleven as well (Mark 9:30-32). Peter had reacted with fear instead of faith in Gethsemane. But so had the other eleven minus Judas, who had done worse and betrayed Jesus (Mark 14:50). What was Peter's unique failure?

Mark 14:54 reveals a failure of Peter rivaled only by Judas. He chose to associate with Jesus' enemies at His trial. Nine of the disciples ran away and hid. John was present at the trial, but did not mingle with the crowd.

Only Peter and Judas kept company with Jesus' enemies. Earlier that night in Gethsemane Peter was ready to go down with Jesus at the expense of his own life. But unlike Jesus, he was unwilling to go down without a fight. He was unable to endure ridicule or the pointed finger. His weaknesses, common with the other eleven, were accentuated in the presence of godless companions.

When we associate with godless people, we can be moved to do things that we would never do in church or with God's people. If you find yourself being negatively influenced by association with certain "friends", learn from Peter's mistake. God wants us to witness to the ungodly. But be careful not to associate with them at the expense of your own faith. Your sense of belonging needs to come from Christ and His people, not from association with the world. Your identity is in Christ. When you associate with ungodly people, it is not in order to fit in or feel accepted. Your purpose is to win them to Christ.

Last of all, let's consider how Peter survived his fall. He fell hard. What kept him from being completely ruined as was the case with Judas who hung himself? Peter, in fact, experienced a remarkable recovery. In Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost, he was bold and unashamed of his Lord. In Acts 3:12-26 Peter addressed the people in Jerusalem following the healing of a lame man. He confronted these "Men of Israel" very boldly, even accusing them of denying Jesus in the presence of Pilate (verses 13, 14). For Peter to confront people of a sin that he himself had committed shows a remarkable healing within himself. How often King David was unable to confront the sins of his sons due to his own sin. Somehow Peter was able to move past his own failure. He could have lived the rest of his life wallowing in shame and guilt. He could have refused to be one of Jesus' disciples, saying, "I'm not worthy."

Unfortunately, we are not able to ask Peter himself how he experienced such a remarkable recovery, but I would like to put forth a proposition. I believe Peter's first step towards recovery was choosing once again to associate with the other ten disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem. When he made his way there, we don't know. But we find him there in Mark 16:14.

Furthermore, Peter's salvation was in that he came to focus on his relationship with Jesus; not on himself or potential rewards or position. He must have looked at Jesus' choice to pick him. From Mark 1:16 to Mark 14:33 Jesus consistently invited Peter into an up-close experience with Himself. Even after engaging in multiple heated arguments with Peter, Jesus still chose Peter to be one of His closest companions. Remembering this must have enabled Peter to believe that there was still hope for a restored relationship with Jesus, even if there were no glamorous rewards.

Peter must have also remembered Jesus' forgiveness before his offense. In Mark 14:27, 28 Jesus had invited Peter and the other disciples to meet Him in Galilee following His resurrection. This promised reunion must have encouraged Peter to believe that he could be restored to a relationship with Jesus.

So what was actually responsible for Peter's recovery? Jesus' love for him. Peter responded to this love. Perhaps he said, "I might be a failure, unfit and unworthy, but because Jesus loves me anyway, I want back into the relationship."

Here's the amazing thing: After the relationship was restored, Jesus gave Peter his position back. In John 21:15-17 Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to be reinstated as one of the twelve apostles. After Jesus and the disciples had eaten breakfast, Jesus drew out from Peter three confessions of love and loyalty for Him – one for each of his denials. Each time Jesus gave Peter a call to feed or shepherd His sheep. Jesus trusted Peter with the care of His flock and in so doing called each of the other disciples to accept Peter back into their special fellowship and ministry.

Maybe you have fallen, too. Maybe you feel unworthy of a personal relationship with Jesus. In closing, I would like to share with you Psalm 37:23-25. (Read) You might fall, but it doesn't have to cut you off from a relationship with Jesus. Don't worry about the reward or the price. Focus on Jesus and your relationship with Him.