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Peter's Fall—Backward and Forward

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The fall of Peter is a popular theme of preachers. Some of the familiar reasons advanced for his fall are lack of prayer, following Jesus afar off, warming himself at the enemies' fire, etc. These reasons are not without some truth, but, according to this writer, they are the fruits of the root we find in Matthew 19-27. Here we find him reflecting an attitude to life which has not yet become out of date—an attitude of a typical modern man. This 'what do I get out of it' attitude to life set Peter on a dialectical descent into demonic depth—a situation in which the individual spirit is not related to God, is filled with a great emptiness.

The Fourth Gospel makes it abundantly clear that Peter followed Jesus knowing that He was the expected Messiah. His brother came to him and said that they had found the Messiah. Then he took Peter to Jesus. This shows that Peter had no doubt as to whom he was following. He shared the popular Jewish conception of Messiah—a view which gave the figurative description of the reign of Messiah in the Old Testament a temporal meaning and expected a Messiah who would come in the clouds of heaven as King of the Jewish nation, free them from the yoke of foreign domination, and restore the ancient religion and worship. Peter left everything and followed such a Messiah. His conception of the Kingdom was thoroughly this worldly. He expected Jesus to establish His Kingdom at any time. He was probably expecting a prominent place for himself in the coming Kingdom. But, when Jesus said that it was hard for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, all the castles Peter was building in the air concerning a materialistic Messianic Kingdom came crashing to the ground one after another (Matthew 19-27). Overcome by impatience, Peter, in his characteristic way, pushed himself ahead of the rest and said, 'We have left all and followed Thee. What then shall we have?' Jesus' answer was couched in such material terms that the surface meaning quieted down Peter for some time.

The whole question was revived on the way to Caesarea Philippi. Jesus said, 'Who do men say that I am?' They replied, 'John the Baptist, Elijah, prophet, etc.' Now he said, 'Who do *you* say that I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the Christ.' In spite of Jesus' appreciative comments on this answer, He knew

that Peter was still ignorant of the real meaning and purpose of the mission of Christ (the anointed). He still entertained the popular Jewish conception of Messiah. Jesus' subsequent remarks show that He did not want His disciples to follow Him any longer with false hopes. This accounts for His sudden introduction of a new element in His teaching. He plainly told them about the sufferings of His last days. He told them how He would be rejected by the elders and chief priests, be killed and rise again on the third day.

These words shattered Peter's hopes concerning the coming Kingdom. The impetuous Peter could not control his impatience. He called Jesus aside and rebuked Him. Jesus also was ready for a show-down. He rebuked Peter saying, 'Get behind me, Satan' (Matthew 16:23). Here we find Satan making a common cause with Peter. The crucial point of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness was concerning the nature of the Kingdom He should establish. Satan tempted Him at this point by suggesting that He should use His divine power to establish a kingdom where all will have enough to eat, drink, wear, etc. As long as Jesus occupied Himself with the building up of such a worldly Kingdom, Satan would leave Him alone and would, if necessary, lend Him a helping hand in this important mission. Jesus did not yield to this subtle temptation and returned victorious from the wilderness. The same Satan is back again with Jesus and uses Peter to tempt Him. It was to the Satan in Peter that Jesus said, 'Get thee behind me.' The subsequent life of Peter shows that he did not understand the real meaning of Jesus' rebuke. He decided to follow the Messiah of his own conception rather than the true suffering Messiah described to him by Jesus in plain words. This choice of Peter was the beginning of his dialectical descent into the demonic depth we have referred to earlier. From this day Jesus' eyes were steadfastly fixed on the cross and His life was a gradual spiritual ascent to the hill of Golgotha. Peter's eyes, on the other hand, were firmly fixed on the Messiah of popular expectation and his life may be paradoxically described as a progressive fleeing from Christ while he followed Him.

Peter's preoccupation with the establishment of a worldly kingdom blinded his eyes to spiritual values. In Gethsemane, when Jesus asked him to watch with Him in prayer, he could not keep awake because he did not understand the nature of Jesus' spiritual struggle and the place of prayer in it. His mind was open to receive only the things connected with a kingdom of physical might. He knew the value of a sword. Although he failed to pray for Jesus, he was ready to use his sword to save Jesus' life. But unwillingly he put his sword back into its sheath in obedience to the command of Jesus. It is easy to picture in one's mind the impatience with which Peter witnessed Jesus' calm submission to the enemies. Peter still entertained a faint hope that Jesus would manifest His power and overcome the enemies. It was with this hope that he followed Jesus afar off. Perhaps, he wanted to be

the first one to run up to Jesus and embrace Him at this miraculous moment. Every step He made in following Jesus became increasingly anxious. But nothing happened and he ended up in the courtyard of the high priest. A ray of hope still remained in him. He sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire. His eyes were anxiously fixed on Jesus to see that miracle with which He would escape. But against his hope the situation was progressing from bad to worse. Hope gave way to despondency. Perhaps, he began to say to himself, if I had known this earlier I would not have wasted about three years in following Him. Now one of the maids of the high priest came along and said, 'You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus.' Peter's answer is a sort of double talk. He said, 'What do you mean? I don't know *this* Jesus.' Of course, Peter never followed a suffering Messiah. He followed the Messiah of popular expectation—a Messiah who would subdue all powers under his feet. Well, to make a long story short, Peter in quick succession denied Christ three times to three different people. Now the cock crowed the second time, and Jesus turned and looked at Peter. This look revived his *love* and passion for Christ. A sense of helplessness, shame and grief overpowered him. He went out and wept bitterly.

Was his weeping real repentance? It was his love of the world that led him to this act of shameful open denial of Christ—a counterpart of the inward denial we have already referred to. His attitude to the world still remained the same. He was sorry for what he did and not for what he was. This sort of weeping has a psychological value. It helps the mind to get rid of pent-up emotions, but a person emerges from it with his wrong attitude unchanged. Real repentance is not just for what one has done but also for what one is. Forgiveness of God and true peace follow only this kind of repentance. The subsequent actions of Peter show that his weeping was not true repentance. Even the Resurrection appearances of Christ failed to free Peter from the grip of his love of the world. The promises of a resurrected, *ghost-like* Christ could not satisfy a pragmatist like Peter. It seemed to him that even a Resurrected Christ was not going to establish the expected Kingdom. He decided to waste no more time in following such a Master. He said to his friends, 'I am going fishing.' His friends also wanted to go with him. Thus they all went fishing.

Peter and his friends fished for the whole night and got nothing. This *nothingness* Peter encountered for the whole night helped him to see himself better than any other time. Peter was highly self-confident. His life up to this point had been characterized by self-affirmation which resulted in self-defeat because self-affirmation carries within itself an implicit dialectic of contradiction. Self-affirmation achieves the negation of itself.¹ When

¹ *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. V, p. 816.

Peter said, 'I am going fishing,' he was making another self-affirmation. He was sure of success in fishing, although he had failed in following Jesus. But the whole night defeat and nothingness were staring him in his face. Peter began to experience an abysmal depth of emptiness within and without.

There is no depth to which man may fall where the grace of God cannot reach him. Jesus came and stood on the shore and said, 'Children, have you any fish?' They answered Him, 'No'. Jesus said, 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat.'² When they let down the net in obedience to the words of Jesus, they got their net full of fish. The great emptiness Peter was experiencing had a sobering influence on him. For the first time he saw Jesus in a different light. He saw how a word of Christ could accomplish in a moment what several of them could not have done for the whole night. He realized for the first time that greatness does not depend on size. He further realized that a word of Christ is much more powerful than the combined might of all in the Kingdom of his wishful thinking. This new understanding convicted him of his sin. 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord,'³ he cried. We feel that this controversial statement of Peter fits this context better than any other. A study of Peter's life will show that this confession could hardly have come out of him earlier. This self-discovery of Peter, that he was a sinful man, helped him to view all things from a better angle. His mind is now open to understand spiritual things and values. By the time Jesus put him the question, 'Lovest thou Me more than these things?', all his past life was before him in a new light. Jesus' question may be expanded as follows: One day I called you Peter; you responded by leaving all and following Me. But you are back at the old life again. Are you going to abandon Me? Do the old ties tug at your heart? Are they drawing you away from Me? Do you still love Me more than these things? Now, you have to decide between them and Me, in this old familiar place.⁴ By the time Jesus put the question to him the third time he realized the full implications of it. He is now quite penitent. He wept and his weeping was real repentance. He repented of what he was. His former *love* of Jesus was for what he could get from Him. Now he loved Jesus for what He was. He fell at His feet in utter gratitude. We do not mean it in the literal sense but in the spiritual sense. This *fall* of Peter at the feet of Jesus is his fall *forward*. This is complete surrender. Jesus said, 'If any man will follow Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.' Before this event Peter denied Christ and His cross. But now he denied his own self and placed his whole life unreservedly at the feet of Christ. From this day Peter's life is a dialectical ascent to the fullness of life. It progressed from victory

² John, 21:6.

³ Luke, 5:8b.

⁴ *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, p. 806.

to victory. Before long he became filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. By one sermon thousands were converted and added to the Church. Another day on his way to the temple he said to a lame man at the gate, 'I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have: in the name of the Jesus of Nazareth, walk.' The man was immediately healed and walked.

What a change in Peter! Once he longed to possess the power of silver and gold. How happy is he now to say that he does not possess them and that he has something else in their place, namely, the power of the name of Jesus! To be filled with this power he had to empty himself of the love of silver and gold. He had to empty himself of his self-conceit. He had to become nothing. He had to fall from the height of his own greatness to the feet of Jesus. Here is a great paradoxical truth of the Christian life and power. Paul says, 'my strength is made perfect in weakness.'⁵ To become nothing is to have a new attitude to one's own life, namely, the attitude of 'poverty of spirit.' It is to feel that we *are* nothing and we *have* nothing. It is to fall at Jesus' feet in utter submission and absolute dependence.

This personal experience of dialectical descent into demonic depth (fall backward) and dialectical ascent to fullness of life (fall forward) gave Peter an amazing insight into human nature and destiny. In his first Epistle he says that the people who are unrelated to God are 'no people' and that those who are related to God through obedience to truth are 'God's people'⁶—people who have realized their true destiny. The former progressively wither away like grass and the latter are born anew to a 'living hope' and have an inheritance which is 'imperishable, undefiled and unfading.'⁷

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⁵ 2 Corinthians, 12:9.

⁶ 1 Peter, 2:10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:4.