

“I Am Not”

John 18:15–18; 25–27

¹⁵Simon 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,¹⁶but 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.¹⁷Then 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.”¹⁸Now 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..

²⁵Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, “You are not also one of His disciples, are you?” He denied it, and said, “I am not.”²⁶One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, said, “Did I not see you in the garden with Him?”²⁷Peter then denied it again, and immediately a rooster crowed. [NASB]

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I. Introduction

Relentless. Such is the nature of Jesus’ suffering as He approaches the cross. Relentless brutality. A few days ago, Jesus rides into the city—Jerusalem—the city where God had been pleased to give this fallen world a picture of the heavenly kingdom. A few days ago, the crowd hails Him as King. A few days ago, Jesus is filled with pity for them, for He knows they are utterly filled with self-serving fickleness. He knows they will soon flip-flop from their royal reception to radical rejection. Relentless brutality. Jesus is tempted to receive their regal treatment as He rides into the city... and soon He will be tempted to renounce their relation to Him.

Then follow a few days during which Jesus is buffeted by the relentless brutality. His Father’s house, the Temple, has degenerated into a den of thieves. The place for worshipping God and sharing mercy with the poor has become a place for worshipping the wallet and stealing from the poor. Relentless. The Messiah’s authority is *mocked* by those priests and teachers whose very purpose in life was to *lead* the people to live under the Messiah’s authority.

Relentless brutality. The overwhelming stink of hypocrisy and legalism of the teachers—the scribes and the Pharisees—slams into Jesus everywhere He turns. Relentless. This city of refuge has become a city that kills the prophets and stones those whom God sends to her. Jesus would gather her under the comfortable shadow of His wing, but she will have none of it.

Relentless brutality. Jesus has been betrayed by a very close friend named Judas Iscariot. Time and again Jesus has been terribly misunderstood by His own disciples. Jesus has been left in silence—divine silence—by His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. Relentless. Jesus has been arrested and bound by hordes that so recently hailed Him.

Relentless brutality. Jesus has been led, bound, to a farcical beginning of a travesty of trial. His own disciples have fled, and one who followed along followed far behind to avoid identification with Jesus. And now that disciple—one of the Jesus’ three closest friends and disciples—denies Jesus. Relentless. And the flogging has not even begun. The suffering Jesus has yet to face is multiplied, intensified, by the desertion of all his friends. The betrayal has already happened, but even then He had a close group of friends.

Now that close group of friends has scattered which might, if you will, be called *passive* desertion. They left the scene to cower in their own homes. That’s what Jesus had told them to do. He knew it was not safe for them to stick around. In the Garden when He was arrested and bound, He had commanded His captors to let His disciples go. In doing so, He implied to them that they *should* go.

And that is what they did. Most of them, anyhow. One of them, Peter, followed at a distance. Too bold not to follow; too timid to follow closely. Poor Peter. Why does he just keep getting himself into trouble? Poor Peter. The other disciples passively deserted Jesus. Peter *actively denied* Jesus. Poor Peter. Yet if it weren’t for Peter, we’d be impoverished in our knowledge of just how great is the love of Christ our Savior.

So let us look into Peter’s perplexity, and Christ’s compassion.

II. Peter’s Perplexity

Peter’s perplexity. It wasn’t what Peter *planned* to do. It wasn’t what Peter *wanted* to do. It wasn’t what Peter ever for a moment *thought or imagined* he might do. And that was Peter’s problem. Now, before you start thinking about the pride of unbelievers who dare not explore the

depth of their iniquity, the inherited sinfulness of their soul, the natural proclivity toward evil that resides in common in all human beings... remember that Peter is a believer.

Peter has the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. By that Holy Spirit Peter, above all the disciples, has confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Peter was pulled by Jesus, along with James and John, into the Garden of Gethsemane at close range. Jesus asked—Jesus told—Peter to pray. Peter slept. Sound familiar?

Peter, who believed in and loved the Lord Jesus, now found himself at the door into the courtyard of the high priest. He had no key, and he had no password. It would have been good for him to turn around and go home. Peter was at the door. Peter wanted “in,” although Jesus had just secured all the disciples’ “out.”

Instead, Peter caught the attention of another disciple who had the password and key of acquaintance with the high priest. We don’t know who that other disciple is. Some think it was John; just as likely or more so, it is another follower of Christ but not one of the eleven.

In any case, that other disciple persuaded the high priest’s slave-girl, the doorkeeper, to let Peter in. And now Peter faces one of the biggest surprises of his life: he faces... *himself*. It happens suddenly. It happens unexpectedly. No warning... none, that is, except for the warning Jesus had given him that Satan had demanded to sift Peter like wheat.^{Lk22.31} No warning... none, that is, except for Jesus’ warning Peter to watch and pray, lest he fall into temptation.^{Lk22.40} No warning... none, that is, except for Jesus’ having told Peter that he would deny Jesus three times that night before the rooster crowed.

Peter faces one of the biggest surprises—and biggest perplexities—of his life: namely, he faces *himself*. It was almost nothing. A mere comment... a minor curiosity.¹⁷ “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” Really nothing more than an impudent slave-girl who should have been minding her own business. Meaningless chatter, really.

It had not been all that long before, that Peter had listened with a different kind of perplexity to Jesus, when Jesus said ^{Jn10.7} “I am the door of the sheep... I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Whether the slave-girl meant it this way or not, Peter heard something very different than a Door who gave abundant life. Peter now heard a door of danger, a door of death, a door of condemnation. And that danger, death, and condemnation was tied right to “this man” of whom the slave-girl spoke. Peter wasn’t expecting this, and his answer was not slow in coming. He said, “I am not.”

Consider Peter’s perplexity. Peter had, mere moments before, seen an entire battalion of soldiers laid flat on the ground by the King of kings softly-spoken words: “I AM.” And now, here is Peter—big, bold, sword-wielding Peter—laid flat in fear before a slave of slaves, and he not so softly says “I am not.”

Now tell me, what mean class of citizen has laid you flat with fearful reticence to declare your union with the King who flattens battalions with a word? What mean class of pagan who says “There is no God” has cowered you into denying your union with the God who will avenge with righteous anger, all who go to their grave spitting in the face of His beloved Son? What mean class of unbeliever has made you spend years trying to “be their friend,” when that “friendship” will last only so long as you say nothing about your friendship with the Savior of the world?

Oh, don't worry. That's not the point of this passage. The point of this passage is not how pitiful Peter is. The point of this passage is not how pernicious Peter's heart is. No, the point of this passage is how *powerless* Peter was. Powerless, that is, *to undo his identity... even with his denial of Christ*. The point of this passage is *how powerless Peter was—with even the strongest of offenses—to break the bond that tied him to Jesus*. Are you as powerless as Peter?

Nevertheless, Peter's denial didn't make his life or his love for the One he had just denied any more comfortable. Quite the contrary. Peter is now caught in a spiral that wants to swallow him up. His perplexity only grows. It becomes easier for Peter to deny Jesus... and easier for Peter to lose himself the more he tries to save himself. Look at him, will you? He is afraid to stay, and afraid to depart. To depart would discover to the others his allegiance to Jesus. To stay will discover to himself his total dependence upon Jesus' allegiance to him.

So while Jesus is being buffeted by the growls and blows of the bulls of Bashan encircling Him, Peter stands in the cold courtyard comforting himself by the fire. By now he wishes he were a million miles away. But by now he is bound in the fetters of self-protection and self-justification. Self-protection and self-justification *always* entail denying our Savior and cursing Him again. And that, according to Matthew and Mark, is exactly what Peter did.

Peter warms himself with the same comfort with which the wicked collaborators against Jesus comforted themselves. The same fire, the same cursing, the same self-justification. To whom, now, is Peter united? Peter is torn in perplexity. He would be united with Jesus. That is, after all, what drove him to follow Jesus when all the others fled to their homes. But now, suddenly, Peter finds himself uniting himself to those who would mock Jesus. And where is he? He is caught in a no-man's land of shame.

That shame dulls Peter's senses. Two more denials follow closely on the heels of the first, like dogs surrounding you dripping saliva from their fanged jaws. Jesus says “I AM,” and Peter says “I am not.” Jesus declares His divinity and proclaims His divine mission to redeem. Peter dis-associates himself from the One who loves his soul. Poor, perplexed Peter.

Look at this transition! In a moment Peter went from being a man who said “I am not one who would forsake Thee,” to a man who contemptuously said “I am not one who would follow *that man*.” No, Peter did not hold Jesus in contempt. Peter actually held his own soul in contempt. He endangered his soul in order to save his flesh. Does any of this sound familiar?

I wonder, when the cock crowed, did it sound like a still, soft voice, like a dog barking in the distance on a quiet, starry night? A doleful, somewhat nostalgic sound calling you back to nature, to the wild, to the easy life you led before you had to deal with the perplexities of letting Jesus be your Savior? Or did it sound like the blast of a trumpet in Peter's ear, more irritating and discomfiting like chickens howling in the middle of the night and waking you out of a pleasant and ignorant sleep?

Probably neither, actually. Who could ever describe the collision of emotions that must have been crushing Peter when Jesus turned and looked at him after the cock crowed. Flannery O'Connor succeeds where few have, in conveying the shame of a man who denied his young grandson when they were walking, bewildered, through a hostile Atlanta neighborhood. Shame tore the man apart, shame than not even death could have eased. No mere human could describe the shame Peter felt after denying his Creator and Savior and Friend.

III. Christ's Compassion

I shall turn, instead, from Peter's perplexity to Christ's compassion. You see, that is what happened, according to Luke. Upon Peter's third denial, ^{Lk22.60}“Immediately, while he was still

speaking, a rooster crowed. ⁶¹The Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had told him, ‘Before a rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times.’ ⁶²And he went out and wept bitterly.”

Finally, Peter got out of there, where he never should have been in the first place. Don’t think you can hang on to Jesus when you’re standing far away, following at a distance. Don’t think you can find spiritual comfort from Jesus, when you’re comforting yourself with the fires and coals of the world. You get burned from those.

And don’t think you can help Jesus through His suffering by putting yourself into danger. When Jesus came into this world to die for you, He did so knowing that He would have to do it all on His own. And all alone. No doubt Jesus appreciated Peter’s good intentions. But Jesus pitied Peter still more. And it’s a good thing. Peter not only denied association with Jesus, but by thinking himself able to comfort Jesus with his presence, Peter dismissed Jesus’ sole proprietorship of Peter’s salvation. Peter actually dissed Jesus’ mission by trying to comfort Jesus with his presence. This was not all that different from when Peter told Jesus He shouldn’t have to suffer... and Jesus said, “Get behind Me, Satan, you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but on man’s.”^{Mt16.23}

There could be no... repeat *no* comfort given to Jesus in this. Don’t try to lessen Jesus’ agony by offering to bear some of His burden for your sins. There is no... repeat *no* comfort ever to be found in the eternal fury of God against unrepentant sinners. If Jesus could have received any comfort in His suffering, then so could the condemned in their punishment. For you to receive eternal comfort, Jesus must take your eternal discomfort. *All of it.*

“The Lord turned and looked at Peter.” The few minutes Peter had spent in the courtyard seemed like an eternity to him. All Peter could see were the stares of eyes filled with furious hatred. That courtyard was a little taste of hell. From Peter’s perspective, every soul in that courtyard hated him with pure malevolence. Every soul in that courtyard would, from Peter’s perspective, gladly have ripped and clawed at his skin and his innards, murdering him with death that never came. The same ravenous and roaring lions that gaped and groped at Jesus gaped and groped at Peter’s own soul.

That courtyard was a taste of hell. Just like in hell, everybody in that courtyard would say, “I am not [a disciple of Jesus].” Ironically, Peter was the only one in that courtyard who was lying. He said “I am not” Jesus’ disciple, when in fact he knew he was. Peter, citizen of heaven and a son of God, spoke more like the father of lies than did any other soul in that hellish courtyard.

That courtyard was a taste of hell, and Peter cried out for just a drop of water on his tongue. It was nowhere to be found. All Peter’s self-protection and self-justification only made his tongue more parched, his throat more dry, his bones more thirsty. No water anywhere, not even a drop.

Not, that is, until Jesus turned and looked at Peter. There was no hatred in Jesus’ eyes. There was no fury in Jesus’ eyes. There was no bitter vengeance in Jesus’ eyes, despite Peter’s denials. Only pity, only compassion, only a command for Peter to get out of there while the gate was still open. Peter had put himself in his own little prison-cell of hell... Jesus pushed Peter out the open door with His look. Jesus, bound and beaten before the council of priests, went into Peter’s cell to carry him out.

Water. Water of life. Abundant life pouring out from the compassionate eyes of the condemned Redeemer and suffering Savior.

Water. Abundant life flowing out from the eyes of Peter. The life of repentance. The life of losing self and gaining Jesus. The life of bitter tears. Peter failed; Jesus did not. Peter had slept; Jesus had prayed. ^{Lk22.31}“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; ³²but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” Jesus always gets what He prays for. Jesus got Peter, and Peter got Jesus. Peter failed, but his faith did not. Peter denied Jesus; Jesus did not deny Himself. Peter tried to preserve himself; Jesus preserved him instead.

Peter tasted hell with his mouth of denial; Jesus gave him a taste of heaven with His eyes of compassion. Peter was perplexed; Jesus was compassionate. He still is. Would you, too, walk into the courtyard or the cell, trying to help out the Savior with your own payment plan? Don't worry, it won't kill you. But Jesus won't let you be very comfortable there either. He will look at you with eyes full of compassion, and when you see them, you'll want out of the courtyard and out of the cell.

And the door is open.