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## Peter's Tears

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# PETER'S TEARS

Steven L. Olsen

*Abstract: Peter's denial of Christ is one of only about two dozen events reported in all four gospels. Three of the accounts conclude by Peter's weeping. This paper examines the antecedents, possible motivations, and long-term consequences of this crisis in Peter's life as recorded in the scriptural text and considers its application for all disciples of the Savior.*

OF the hundreds of individual incidents reported in the four gospels, Peter's denial of Christ is one of only about two dozen included in all four gospels and the one event by which Peter is perhaps best known by the Christian world generally. Three of the gospel writers conclude their accounts of this tragedy with Peter's weeping; Matthew and Luke add that on this occasion Peter wept "bitterly."<sup>1</sup> A review of this crisis in Peter's life sheds light on what caused this "rock" (Mark 3:16) to shed tears so freely and poignantly at the end of the Savior's mortal life. Peter's experience also provides insight into our own human struggles to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him" (Moroni 10:32).

The immediate series of events that culminates in Peter's weeping begins at the Mount of Olives, where Jesus and the apostles retire after the Last Supper. In this sacred refuge, Christ informs his most trusted and loyal disciples, "All ye shall be

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:55-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27. LDS Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Gospels, Harmony of."

offended because of me this night,” prefiguring his crucifixion. He also prophesies of his eventual resurrection, promising that he will “go before” his apostles into Galilee. In response, Peter insists that while others might abandon the Master, he would not. Christ counters with the famous prophecy and mild rebuke, “Verily I say unto thee, that this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.” Peter persists in his declaration of loyalty, now joined by the other apostles, to which Christ simply, and knowingly, demurs (Matthew 26:31-35).

Following this exchange, the Savior and his apostles walk to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ’s atoning sacrifice begins. His suffering continues throughout the night, during which he endures a series of judicial proceedings and public humiliations culminating with his crucifixion on Golgotha. It is during his trial at the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest, that Christ’s earlier forebodings come to pass regarding Peter and the other disciples.

Accompanying Caiaphas in this act of judgment are the scribes and elders, “and all the council,” the formal juridical authority of the Jews at Jerusalem. Matthew’s account of the trial has a singular concern: to challenge the validity of the council’s proceedings. He indicts the council on the legitimacy of the witnesses they call to testify against Jesus. Specifically, Matthew states that the council “sought false witnesses against Jesus, to put him to death; but found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none.” There is biting double irony in this observation: not only does the council fail to find any *true* witnesses against the Savior, they cannot, at least initially, find any *false* ones either. This absurdity is so astounding that Matthew repeats the fact in order to underscore the trial’s illegitimacy. Finally, however, “two false witnesses” come forward and provide a statement which Caiaphas uses to condemn Jesus. This judgment prompts the council to sentence Jesus to death. Imposition of the sentence begins with

his receiving public scorn by way of spitting and flogging and culminates in his crucifixion, a horrible and humiliating form of death reserved for the worst criminals (Matthew 26:57-68).

During the trial, which Peter watches from a distance, he is approached three times regarding his acquaintance with Jesus: (1) by a "damsel" as he "sat without in the palace," (2) by a "maid" after he retreats to the porch of the palace, and (3) by a group "that stood by," who claim that Peter's speech betrays his likely acquaintance with Jesus. Peter denies all three accusations, each more emphatically than the previous. According to Matthew, "immediately" after Peter's third and most adamant denial "the cock crew." Matthew's account concludes: "And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out and wept bitterly" (Matthew 26:69-75).

Passionate weeping of this kind often has multiple causes, and frequently the biblical narrative can be understood simultaneously on more than one level. So, it should be no surprise that there could have been a number of reasons for Peter's bitter tears.

The most immediate reason for Peter's weeping may have resulted from his denial of Christ, not once but three times. It should be noted that Peter did not deny Christ's divinity, only his acquaintance with him. Being "offended because of" his master was completely inconsistent with Peter's customary character. Throughout Christ's ministry, Peter had been one of his most loyal and intimate followers, receiving and bearing witness of his divinity on numerous occasions and being present for most of his teachings, miracles, and acts of service. Hence his sorrow may have been motivated partly by the profound disappointment he felt for his uncharacteristic behavior on this occasion.

A related reason for Peter's tears may have been regret for having earlier contradicted his Lord. Christ's statement to

Peter, “Thou shalt deny me,” came because Peter had objected to Christ’s observation that he and the other disciples would “be offended because of” him during his trial and its immediate aftermath. Though impetuous, Peter was not in the habit of contradicting his Master. He loved Jesus as few other mortals and was ever the loyal disciple. On this occasion, however, he expresses his loyalty in a way that reveals a degree of disrespect for Christ’s prophetic powers. Peter’s grief likely included total contrition for this excess.

A third possible reason for Peter’s tears is the realization that he had inadvertently fulfilled Christ’s prophecy that his disciples would soon “be offended because of” him. In order to avoid his accusers during the trial at Caiaphas’s palace, Peter gradually retreats from Jesus’s company and eventually flees the scene altogether. Earlier that night, Christ had two other occasions to chasten Peter for his lapses in courage and character. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ entrusts Peter, James, and John to watch with him during his suffering. Instead of keeping watch, they fall asleep, not once but twice, “for their eyes were heavy” (Matthew 26:37-44). Next, upon Christ’s arrest Peter attacks and “smote off [the] ear” of a servant of Caiaphas who had accompanied the arresting party. While healing the injury, Christ reminds Peter and the other disciples that the Son of God is in full control of the situation and that nothing would be done contrary to the will of His Father (Matthew 26:47-56). Thus on three successive occasions within a few hours of one another at the time of the Savior’s greatest need, Peter occasions a rebuke from his Master, whom he loves more than life itself. In all cases, Peter comes up short, consistently disappointing his Master. Realizing his persistent weakness may have added bitterness to Peter’s tears.

A fourth motivation for his sorrow could have come from the dilemma that Peter faces by accompanying Jesus to Caiaphas’s palace. When Peter is repeatedly accused of being

Christ's disciple, he perjures himself with the resulting denials. In actual fact, he was one of Jesus's earliest and most loyal, ardent, and intimate disciples. During the Savior's three-year ministry, Peter is hardly ever far from his side. He knows him and can testify of his divinity as well as any other mortal (Matthew 16:13-19). But had Peter not perjured himself in casual conversation during Jesus's trial, he would likely have been brought before the council as a true witness. Then his testimony would have had not just mortal but eternal consequences. To the council's pointed inquiry, Peter would have had either to deny Christ's divine son-ship and messianic ministry, thereby perhaps committing the unpardonable sin, or to provide the council with reliable evidence to condemn Jesus in accordance with Jewish law. For Peter, these two options are completely untenable, so he may have knowingly chosen the least of the evils and declared simply, "I do not know the man" (Matthew 26:72, 74). The bitterness of his tears during the aftermath may have expressed (1) justifiable anger at Caiaphas and the council for condemning an innocent man, (2) frustration at his inability to rescue his Lord from unjust and illegal proceedings and the certainty of an ignominious death, and (3) the realization that he would now be without the constant companionship of his beloved Lord for the rest of his mortal life.

Peter has several reasons to weep bitterly at the conclusion of Christ's trial, but all of them reflect a total commitment to the Son of God, to whom he had pledged complete loyalty, in spite of his human weakness and imperfection.

Peter learns much from these poignant experiences because throughout the rest of his ministry he never has to re-learn the lessons. For example, he likely realizes that his most admirable human qualities are no match for Christ's divine qualities. Gifts of the Spirit like prophecy are far more powerful for eternal purposes than human virtues like loyalty and courage.

So, while Peter's character may have been worthy of emulation, the Savior's spiritual capacities are of far greater value.

Peter also recognizes that his weakness in watching over, accompanying, and caring for his Lord in his hour of torment needs to be transformed into a virtue. Following his resurrection Jesus will no longer be constantly in their midst. Hence Peter and the other apostles will have to nurture the Saints as the Savior had done. Despite their human shortcomings, he and the other apostles have been ordained to the ministry. As they minister tirelessly to meet the needs of others and to establish the Kingdom of God, they are also expected to overcome the weaknesses that formerly limited their service. Doing so is not possible without considerable effort on their part as well as the blessings of their priesthood ordination and the influence of the Comforter, whom Christ promises to send in his absence (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).

Peter also comes to understand that Christ would not be present to compensate for his unbridled passions (Alma 38:12). Thus Peter must overcome his human excesses or suffer their inevitable consequences. In relation to his attack on Caiaphas's servant, for example, Peter comes to understand that force is not the way to minister the gospel, establish the Kingdom of God, or change lives for the better. At the very time that Peter sorrows for his persistent imperfections, Christ is providing the way through the atonement for him and the rest of mankind to overcome their natural inclinations and the temptations of the flesh.

Most importantly, Peter learns that his relationship with the Savior is the most important thing in his life and that this relationship – established by revelation, nurtured by spiritual experiences, confirmed by priesthood ordination, and preserved by covenant – transcends all of Peter's human weaknesses and failings. As Jesus promised, he does "go before" his disciples and helps them accomplish everything that he charged



them to do, including overcoming the world. To be sure, Peter's shortcomings are a factor in the success of this undertaking, but neither Peter nor Christ intends to define their relationship in terms of them. These men have more important things to do than simply manage Peter's weaknesses. They both know that Peter's imperfections will be overcome in the course of magnifying his divine commission.

Peter's subsequent ministry is as exemplary as that of any other disciple of Christ. He is among the first to bear personal witness of Christ's resurrection (Luke 24:12, 34; John 20:2-10). He embraces Christ's repeated charge, "feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17). He bears the first public witness of Christ's divine ministry and performs the first public miracle by the power of his apostolic authority (Acts 2:14-27; 3:1-7). He successfully challenges the "men of Israel" to accept Christ as their savior and to be baptized (Acts 3:12-26). He testifies of Christ before Caiaphas, other Jewish leaders, and their families and respectfully declines their stern injunction to be silent about Jesus's divinity (Acts 4:5-21). He purifies the Church of those who attempt to pervert its revealed practices (Acts 5:1-11). He is twice miraculously freed by an angel from unjust imprisonment (Acts 5:17-23; 12:1-11). He preaches the gospel and testifies of Christ throughout the Holy Land (Acts 5:14-25). He heals Aeneas and raises Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:32-43). And he introduces the gospel to the Gentiles in accordance with a divine vision (Acts 10:9-48). On none of these occasions does Peter exhibit the kinds of human weakness that characterized his behavior on the day that Christ died. This is not to say that he never again makes a mistake; but these experiences reveal the transforming capacity of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, priesthood blessings, and righteous influences for all those who desire to achieve their divine potential. As Peter comes unto Christ he discovers his weakness (Ether 12:27). Through Peter's persistence and the grace of God, his

weakness is transformed until he exemplifies the qualities of a true witness and disciple of the Savior.

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