

# Denied

Denying Jesus leads to sorrow and guilt.

An early controversy in church history occurred during the third century AD following the brutal persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor Decius [DEH shuhs]. At issue was whether Christians who had publicly offered sacrifices to pagan gods—to show loyalty to Rome and avoid persecution—should be admitted back into the church. Some believers (especially those with family members who refused to compromise their faith and became martyrs), argued against reinstating the compromisers. In their view, to offer a sacrifice to a Roman god even under the threat of death was to deny Christ as Savior and Lord. Other believers, however, argued those Christians who genuinely repented of their compromise should be welcomed again into the full fellowship of the church.

Most of us are inspired when we hear accounts of Christians who boldly face martyrdom rather than compromise their commitment to Jesus Christ. The stories of those who falter in their faith during persecution are rarely recorded. How would you respond to threats against your life or the lives of your loved ones for refusing to compromise your faith? Sadly, there are Christians in various parts of the world who are faced with such a dilemma today. As in previous centuries, some Christians remain faithful even in the face of persecution; others do not.

This session focuses on the experience of one of Jesus' first disciples, Simon Peter. Peter boasted to Jesus that he would never deny Him. But Jesus knew His disciple better than Peter knew himself. Jesus warned Peter that the devil wanted to sift him like wheat and that Peter would stumble badly in his faith. At a crucial point, Peter would deny that he was a follower of Jesus—in fact, he would deny even knowing Jesus!

The account of Peter's denial of Christ is a cautionary story that warns all of us as believers to beware if we think ourselves invulnerable to a faltering faith. Peter's denial is also a story that reveals the compassion and forgiveness Jesus has for His followers who sometimes fail. As we explore this session's Bible passage, we will discover help for avoiding a faltering faith. We will be reminded of God's amazing grace. His enduring love and ready forgiveness of faltering yet repentant believers are life-changing realities.

# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **LUKE 22:54-71**

Luke 22:54-62 describes how Jesus was taken to the house of the high priest following His arrest. Peter followed at a distance to see what would happen. As Peter sat around a courtyard fire with a group of people, three individuals in succession identified him as being with Jesus in the garden. Peter denied the charge each time, even denying that he knew Jesus at all. After the third denial, a rooster crowed. Peter then remembered that Jesus had predicted his denials. He fled the high priest's courtyard and wept bitterly.

In 22:63-65, Luke reported the initial abuse Jesus experienced at the high priest's residence. The men who surrounded Jesus mocked and beat Him, derisively demanding that He prophesy which one of them had hit Him.

Luke 22:66-71 then describes Jesus' early morning appearance and trial before the Sanhedrin. The chief priests and scribes demanded that Jesus confess to them whether He was the Messiah. Jesus knew their motives, however, and responded by pointing out they would not believe the truth even if He told them. He then assured His accusers that from then on the Son of Man would be seated at the right hand of God's power. The chief priests and scribes then asked whether by His statement that Jesus was claiming to be the Son of God. When Jesus did not deny the claim, His accusers declared they didn't need to hear any further testimony. They knew they could bring the charge of blasphemy against Him.

# EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

## **DISTANCE** (Luke 22:54-55)

It isn't entirely clear whether Simon Peter's sword strike against the high priest's servant was an act of panic, courage, or a combination of the two. What is clear is that after Jesus intervened and stopped the violence, all the disciples, including Peter, scattered from the garden in a state of fear. However, Peter summoned enough courage to secretly follow the arresting mob at a distance until the group arrived with their prisoner at the house of the Jewish high priest. As Jesus was taken inside the residence for questioning, Peter slipped into the courtyard and quietly joined a smaller group of people sitting around a fire for warmth.

## VERSE 54

### **They seized him, led him away, and brought him into the high priest's house. Meanwhile Peter was following at a distance.**

This verse serves as a transition from the scene in the garden of Gethsemane to the initial place where Jesus was taken for interrogation before Jewish leaders. The events describe the treatment of Jesus, yet the narrative's focus is on Simon Peter in verses 54-62. The Greek verb translated **seized** is a technical term that means "to arrest" (see also Acts 1:16; 12:3). Jesus was first taken to **the high priest's house**.

Two individuals are referred to as the high priest in the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' trials—Annas and Caiaphas [KAY uh fuhs]. John's Gospel reports that Jesus' first interrogation took place before Annas (see John 18:13). Annas had been appointed as the high priest in Jerusalem about AD 6 by Quirinius, the Roman governor of Syria. He had been deposed in AD 15, however, and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, actually held the position at the time of Jesus' trials. Caiaphas served as high priest in Jerusalem from AD 18 to 37.

Annas retained considerable influence over the Jerusalem priesthood even after being deposed. This is likely the reason that he was the first to interrogate Jesus. However, it is equally likely that Caiaphas's residence was the *high priest's house* mentioned in Luke 22:54. The ruling high priest's residence would have been large enough to host all the members of the Sanhedrin who came to judge Jesus.

Luke reported that as the arresting mob led Jesus to the high priest's residence, **Peter was following** the group **at a distance**. Although this leading disciple had quickly drawn the sword to defend his Master in the garden, Peter now was controlled by fear. Perhaps Jesus' rebuke of his severing the ear of the high priest's servant contributed to Peter's anxiety. He had previously boasted that he would die with Jesus (see Mark 14:31); however, the present circumstances now made his boast a real possibility, and Peter fearfully kept his distance from the mob. Did Peter still hear the haunting echoes of Jesus' prediction of his denials? We can only speculate.

Peter's physical distance from Jesus at this time may not have been great, but his spiritual distance must have felt like a chasm. Peter's spiritual distance from Jesus was evident in his words and actions. Likewise, when believers today grow spiritually distant from Jesus, it shows up in our words and actions. We may sometimes lament that we don't feel close to the Lord. What we are actually recognizing is that we have moved away from prayer and other spiritual disciplines that keep us close and obedient to Jesus. He never forsakes us, but we sometimes choose to distance ourselves from Him through neglect of regular spiritual fellowship.

## VERSE 55

### **They lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, and Peter sat among them.**

The temperature in the early morning hours was cold enough that the group who remained outside the high priest's house **lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard**. Evidently, they also expected to be there for some time, because they **sat down together** around the fire pit. Exactly who these people were is not clear; they may have been part of the mob in the garden, since three of them appear to recognize Peter as being with Jesus when He was taken into custody.

The fact that **Peter** could sit down **among them** without being recognized immediately could have several explanations. First, the group around the fire might not have been at the forefront of the arresting mob; thus, they might not have gotten a good look at Peter in the dim light of torches. Second, the fire in the courtyard might have been too small at the start to provide much visibility. Third, Peter may have covered his head or face as he approached the fire and sat down. He probably attempted to be as inconspicuous as possible, avoiding eye contact with the other people gathered around the fire. In any case, the recent events in the garden no doubt were replaying in Peter's mind.

We should commend Peter for wanting to know what was going to happen to Jesus. Peter genuinely loved Him and had spent some three years traveling, observing, learning, and ministering with Jesus. In the garden, however, he had watched as Jesus was taken into custody like a criminal. He had tried to defend his Master but succeeded only in receiving his Master's rebuke. Peter was both fearful and uncertain about what to do in the situation. He wanted to help, but he did not want to experience what was happening to Jesus.

There is a word of truth here for believers today. Jesus' call to discipleship demands that we love Him more than any others, including ourselves. He calls on His disciples to follow Him whatever the cost (see Luke 14:26-27). May we never spiritually distance ourselves from Him and the radical life of discipleship that He calls each of us to live!

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Disciple" on pages 424–425 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why are the requirements of Christian discipleship so high? Are all Christians expected to obey the high standards of discipleship? How do you exhibit discipleship to Christ in the use of your time, talents, and treasure?

## **DENIAL** (Luke 22:56-60a)

When approached by a servant girl, Peter denied knowing Jesus. When another person accused Peter of being one of Jesus' followers, he denied it. When yet another person insisted that he was a follower of Jesus—since Peter was a Galilean—Peter denied knowing what the man was talking about.

### **VERSE 56**

**When a servant saw him sitting in the light, and looked closely at him, she said, “This man was with him too.”**

The courtyard was likely occupied by members of the high priest's household workers as well as some who had been involved in supporting Jesus' arrest. It was a part of the high priest's villa, which likely was enclosed by a wall. Peter's face would not have been a frequent one seen in the courtyard; thus, the disciple attracted the attention of a female **servant**—the Greek word here is the feminine form.

Although darkness still hung over the courtyard, people's faces were somewhat visible in the firelight. The servant-woman **looked closely** (“earnestly looked,” KJV) at Peter, suggesting that she thought she might have seen the man somewhere before but couldn't remember where. Then suddenly she remembered: **This man was with him** (Jesus) **too**. We can imagine that the woman expressed her observation with an accusing tone, for no one felt more threatened by her words than Peter. All other conversations probably stopped, and all eyes focused on the nervous visitor **sitting in the light** of the fire.

When Jesus taught His followers that in Him they are the light of the world, He went on to urge them not to hide their identification with Him (the true Light of the world) but to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Publicly identifying ourselves as followers of Christ in the United States today typically isn't newsworthy; certainly it is seldom costly. But occasionally it is genuinely costly. And in some places in the world today, believers still risk ostracism, arrest, and even martyrdom on a daily basis for openly promoting faith in Christ.

In the highly charged atmosphere of the high priest's courtyard, Simon Peter felt the hostile stares of others. He heard the servant-woman identify him loudly as one of Jesus' followers. He felt the rush of fear and the natural desire of self-preservation. Then Satan pounced to sift Peter like wheat.

### **VERSE 57**

**But he denied it: “Woman, I don't know him.”**

As soon as the servant-woman identified Peter as having been with Jesus at His arrest, Peter **denied it**. The expression **I don't know him** implies more than Peter's simply denying he was a follower of Jesus. Peter insisted that he did not even know who Jesus was. This was the deceptive response from a disciple who when asked by Jesus whom the disciples thought He was, answered, "God's Messiah" (Luke 9:20). This was the frightened response of a believer who only a few hours earlier had boldly boasted to his Master, "I'm ready to go with you both to prison and to death" (22:33). Peter's faith was vastly weaker than he knew, just as Jesus had predicted (see 22:34).

The fear that Peter experienced is in direct contrast to the courage that Jesus would show before His accusers. Jesus would withstand the accusations of the powerful members of the Sanhedrin, the high priest, and Pontius Pilate without wavering. Peter could not stand up against the accusation of a servant-woman. Everyone faces fear. Courage is the ability to overcome fear and do what is right. Peter responded to fear with panic and dishonesty.

The statement that Peter made was a lie. There are many reasons why people might choose to tell a lie instead of the truth. Here the reasons clearly were fear and a desire to avoid the consequences of telling the truth. A lie might allow Peter to slip unharmed from the group that was hostile to Jesus. The truth probably would have led to his arrest and sharing the fate of his Master.

There is a reason Jesus called Satan "the father of lies" (John 8:44). In a world in which Satan has great influence, truth can be a costly way of speaking and acting. We live in a culture today that constantly attempts to intimidate Christians and silence the truth of God's Word. Some of the potential consequences of telling the truth in modern culture are a loss of friends, loss of a job, shunning by family members, vilification on social media, and even violence. The more prevalent that evil becomes in society, the greater the temptation becomes for people to resort to believing and telling lies. Peter failed his test in this case; we as believers must also recognize that there are almost certainly times when we have failed to be courageous disciples too. Maybe we remained silent when we should have taken a stand. Perhaps we lied or at least concealed our faith to protect ourselves or the things we love. Peter's example in Scripture is a warning to all of us as believers that one day we might face a similar situation when our commitment to Christ is severely put to the test. We will have to choose: Will I shine the light of my faith before others, or will I try to hide it under a basket of deception?

## **VERSE 58**

**After a little while, someone else saw him and said, "You're one of them too." "Man, I am not!" Peter said.**

Peter was not safe despite his earlier denial of knowing Jesus to the female servant. This time it was a man who took notice of Peter. It is unclear whether the man had heard the female servant's previous accusation. The atmosphere at the high priest's house was highly charged and suspicions were raised regarding strangers. The accusation was slightly different: **"You're one of them too!"** He accused Peter of being a part of a group that followed Jesus. The phrase *one of them* probably refers to the group of apostles. The charge that Peter belonged to Jesus' inner circle may have presented an even greater threat to his safety. The question was whether Peter would gain courage and openly identify with Jesus or compound his previous lie with another.

Peter sadly chose the latter direction, answering, **"Man, I am not!"** Peter's courage was not growing but diminishing further. There were many times in Jesus' ministry when Peter gladly identified with Jesus. When Jesus was popular and healing people, Peter was happy to stand with Jesus and be known as His disciple. When the crowds were amazed at the teaching of Jesus, he would proudly stand close to Jesus and be recognized as one of the followers in His inner circle.

It is easy to identify as a Christian when we're surrounded by other believers. It doesn't take much courage to stand for truth in a Bible study or church worship service. Peter had earlier promised never to betray Jesus and offered to die with Him if necessary. Hypotheticals are easy, and we easily present ourselves as heroic before the battle. We shouldn't forget that millions of Christians around the world face real dangers associated with their faith and worship of Jesus each day. Only God knows how many Christians have been persecuted in private and faraway places. Their stories may never be known to us, but God knows and will reward them for their faithfulness and sacrifice.

## VERSE 59

**About an hour later, another kept insisting, "This man was certainly with him, since he's also a Galilean."**

If Peter thought he was safe after fending off the second accusation, he was once again under pressure **about an hour later**. According to John 18:26, the third accusation came from a relative of Malchus, the high priest's servant whose ear Peter had severed with a sword in the garden. It is unclear either whether the relative was aware of Peter's role in the incident or whether Peter was aware of the man's kinship to Malchus. Luke's account does not include those ironic details; instead, Luke reported simply that **another kept insisting, "This man was certainly with him (Jesus), since he's also a Galilean.** Presumably, this was a reference to Peter's manner of speech.

For those living in and around Jerusalem, it would not be difficult to recognize the distinctives of Galilean accents or expressions. Peter's background was indeed that of an everyday working man (fisherman) from the region around the Sea of Galilee. This characteristic easily suggested that he was likely a follower of Jesus, who was also sometimes referred to as a Galilean (see Matt. 26:69).

#### **VERSE 60a**

### **But Peter said, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”**

Peter responded, **“Man I don’t know what you’re talking about!”** The Gospels of Matthew and Mark add that Peter was so adamant in this denial that he also cursed and swore an oath (see Matt. 26:74; Mark 14:71). As Peter's accusers multiplied, his lies and denials also escalated. Evidently, he was now overwhelmed by fear. He would say anything to save himself. He denied being a follower of Jesus. He denied knowing anything about Jesus. In the end, he denied having any knowledge about anything that had to do with Jesus.

One disciple, Judas, had betrayed Jesus to His enemies. Now another disciple—one of Jesus' most trusted followers—had denied having any relationship to Jesus not once but three times! Those who have ever felt the sting of betrayal by a close friend may have at least a tiny measure of understanding of what Jesus experienced in these beginning events of His suffering. Judas's treacherous action did not end well for him. Peter, however, would eventually be repentant and receive the astounding forgiveness of the risen Lord Jesus.

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## **EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Fear” on pages 559–561 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some causes of human fear? What does it mean to have a proper fear of God? How does fear of God enable us to overcome other fears we might have?

## **DEFEAT (Luke 22:60b-62)**

After Peter's third denial, a rooster crowed, fulfilling what Jesus had foretold. Peter then remembered the prediction that he would deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed. He quickly left the courtyard of the high priest's residence, weeping bitterly as he fled.

## VERSES 60b-61

**Immediately, while he was still speaking, a rooster crowed. Then the Lord turned and looked at Peter. So Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.”**

Before Peter could finish his third denial, **a rooster crowed**. The sound was loud enough to hear—and not unusual to hear in the pre-dawn hours of the day. But the rooster’s crowing at that precise moment had a special significance for Peter.

Only Luke’s Gospel records the dramatic scene that occurred **immediately** in conjunction with the third denial and the rooster’s crowing. Up to this moment, it was not obvious that the group huddled around the fire (including Peter) could see Jesus and what was going on with Him. Or perhaps this was the very moment when Jesus’ captors brought Him outside the high priest’s house after the interrogation to mock and beat Him (see Luke 22:63). In any case, Luke reported that at the moment of the rooster’s crowing, **the Lord turned and looked at Peter**. What a heart-piercing look this must have been! Peter suddenly realized that Jesus knew about—perhaps even had heard—his cursing denials of knowing and following Jesus. Their eyes met and silently conveyed the powerful emotions of the moment.

Before Jesus’ arrest, Peter had been full of pride and courage. He would have argued with the other disciples that he would be the last of them to fail in courage. He had promised to die with Jesus if necessary. He could not imagine the series of denials that were now a part of his personal story. When Peter saw Jesus looking at him, the reality of what he had done struck his conscience forcefully. No doubt Peter saw disappointment and sadness in his Master’s eyes. He saw and **remembered the prophetic word of the Lord**. Surely Jesus had known Peter better than he knew himself. Yet, if Peter had gazed into Jesus’ face a bit longer, perhaps he would also have seen the Lord’s loving mercy. Jesus loved Peter despite his denials in the courtyard. The Lord was not ready to give up on Peter.

## VERSE 62

**And he went outside and wept bitterly.**

Peter abandoned his quest to stay and learn of Jesus’ fate. **He went outside and wept bitterly**. Yet, Peter appears to have been in the initial stage of genuine repentance. He began to grieve over what he had to admit was an abject failure of faith. He did not try to justify his actions or make excuses for his failure. He took responsibility for his weak and sinful behavior.

It is important here to draw a distinction between Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus and Peter's denials. The apostle Paul later described two distinctive kinds of sorrow in this way: "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, but worldly grief produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10). I have also heard this distinction described thus in modern terms: One way says, "I'm sorry I got caught." True repentance says, "I am sorry for what I have become and what I did." Judas regretted making the deal to betray Jesus to His enemies, but his sorrow led him to hopelessness and self-destruction. Peter's grief was also intense, but it eventually led him to seek the Lord's forgiveness and restoration. The apostle John reported this post-resurrection scene of forgiveness and restoration of Peter in John 21:15-19. For each of Peter's three denials, Jesus asked the repentant disciple to declare his love for the Lord and to renew a commitment to serve Him.

As stated in the opening paragraphs of this session, Luke's account of Peter's denials serves as a cautionary story for believers today. It is also a vivid illustration of the apostle Paul's warning to Christians that "whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). Peter's denials in some respects may be linked to his failure to pray in the garden as the Lord urged him to do. Peter's story reminds us that serious moral failures are possible for genuine believers. Yet, his story is also a wonderful illustration of God's grace toward His children. Peter was not only restored by Jesus after his denials, but given great opportunities for ministry that the disciple boldly embraced. As believers, we are sometimes too quick to write off fellow Christians who fall into sin and disobedience. Once again, Paul had the proper response for the church to those who sin by commanding the ones who are mature to restore a sinning brother or sister with gentleness (see Gal. 6:1).

The story of Peter's denials is first a lesson for our personal walk with the Lord. We are to be vigilant lest we also deny Him for the praise and approval of others. We must be courageous to identify with Jesus, especially when we are confronted by those who oppose Him and His Word. It is also a vivid reminder to treat those who falter in the body of Christ with the same mercy and forgiveness that Jesus demonstrated to Peter—and to us!

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Repentance" on pages 1344–1345 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does repentance play a vital role in salvation? Why do Christians continue to need repentance in their walk with the Lord? Is there something in your life for which you need to repent? Will you do so now?