

Matthew 26:74 — Peter's Denial: Four Gospels, Four Angles

The Cock as God's Regulatory Order, When He Thought Thereon He Wept, The Lord Turned and Looked upon Peter, The Visage Marred, and John's Period

Scripture Reading: Matthew 26:74; Mark 14:72; Luke 22:61; John 18:27

"Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew." (Matthew 26:74)

"And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter... And Peter went out, and wept bitterly." (Luke 22:61–62)

"Peter then denied again: and immediately the cock crew." (John 18:27)

Matthew: The Cock as Part of God's Regulatory Order

Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew. Matthew's account captures Peter at the lowest point of his downward course. His denial did not begin with cursing and swearing; it waxed worse and worse. Things crossed his lips that should never cross the lips of a disciple of the Lord Jesus. But what is notable in Matthew's gospel is the instrument God used: the cock.

When God created this earth and populated it with animals, he arranged for one to make a large noise early in the morning. Men have not always had electric alarm clocks; God arranged for the arrival of the new day to be announced by the crowing of a cockerel. This bird was a part of God's regulatory order of the creation — set in place for man's good, for the ordinary ordering of night and

day, evening and morning. It was not placed on earth for Peter's benefit specifically, but it was used this time to touch Peter's conscience. In doing what it should do — what it was created to do — it was being a minister of the goodness of God toward a man who was doing what he should not. This is consistent with the theme of Matthew's gospel: the government of God in the hand of the King. Every creature under that government fulfils its appointed role. The cock did. Peter did not.

Mark: When He Thought Thereon He Wept

And the second time the cock crowed, and Peter called to mind the word that Jesus said unto him, Before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice. And when he thought thereon, he wept. Mark's gospel is the gospel of the Lord Jesus as God's perfect servant. Without genealogy, without a birth narrative, without account of his childhood, the Lord simply begins his service in chapter 1. And here, appropriately, the emphasis falls not on the cock alone, not on getting Peter back to work, but on the act of thinking — of genuinely considering what had been done.

It would be so convenient if repentance were a matter of flipping a switch. If the need arose, one could simply become penitent at will, efficiently and quickly, and move on. It does not work that way. And when he thought thereon, he wept. The cock crowed. Peter heard it. But it was not until he called to mind the word that Jesus said, and then thought upon it — held it before his mind, turned it over, let it land — that the tears came. The word of Christ was what produced the repentance; the cock was the occasion that called the word back. Without the word returning to him, there would have been no weeping. Repentance does not work apart from the word of God doing its work in the conscience.

Luke: The Lord Turned and Looked upon Peter

And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter, and Peter remembered the word of the Lord... And Peter went out and wept bitterly. Luke's gospel presents the Lord Jesus as the perfect man. And it is in Luke that we are told about the face of the Lord Jesus: he turned and looked upon Peter. The architecture of the high priest's house had been arranged in advance, as all things were arranged in advance by the one who governs all things, so that the Lord, bound inside, could turn and look through to the courtyard where Peter sat by the fire. And Peter saw his face.

Isaiah 52:14 says of the Lord: his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men. What does that mean? Think of a fine piece of furniture — not an old battered table that has accumulated decades of scratches and dings until no individual mark is noticeable — but an exquisitely made, perfectly finished, flawless piece, every surface a testament to the craftsman's art. On such a piece, the smallest fingerprint is an offense, a visible violation, because it is a mark against perfection. The Lord Jesus, when he was here, was perfection personified. The delight of the Father rested on him without the shadow of a reservation or qualification. When the things that were done to him were done to that perfection, there was nothing to compare with the enormity of it. No human suffering, across all the atrocities of history, can be weighed against what was done to him, precisely because of the infinite distance between the perfection of his person and any mark laid upon it.

It was that face — the face of infinite dignity and infinite love, a face that had been marred more than any man's — that turned and looked upon Peter. And Peter went out and wept bitterly. The high priestly blessing in Numbers 6 says: the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee and give thee peace. This was one of those moments. The Lord lifted up his face to Peter. There was no peace without the bitter tears and the exercise of conscience, but the end of it was that Peter was at peace again with his Lord. It was the face of Jesus that did that.

John: Period

Peter then denied again: and immediately the cock crew. Period.

John's gospel is the gospel of the eternal Son, God come down from above, accomplishing the Father's will and ascending where he was before. His deity is preeminent. And here, in the account of Peter's denial, John writes one sentence and ends it. Not a word about Peter's tears, not a word about the Lord's look, not a word about the cock crowing a second time. Just: Peter denied again. And immediately the cock crew. Period.

Why? Because Peter is not the subject of the scriptures. Jesus is. And in John's gospel, the preeminent thing is not Peter's repentance or the mechanism by which it was produced. The preeminent thing is that the Lord Jesus had said the cock would crow, and it crowed. The word of God was fulfilled. All the things that God has said will surely be fulfilled. The punctuation mark is the point: what was spoken came to pass, exactly as spoken, and nothing more need be said. The period after that sentence is not an omission; it is a theological statement about the certainty and completeness of God's word.

Four Gospels, One Event: Not One Excuse

The same event is told four times, from four angles, each slightly different, each consistent with the characteristic theme of the gospel in which it appears. Matthew: the governmental order of creation, the cock doing its appointed work under the King's administration. Mark: the servant's gospel, the word doing its work when thought upon, repentance not mechanical but genuine. Luke: the perfect man, his face, the look of infinite holiness and love that broke Peter's heart. John: the period, the fulfillment of the word of God, no more need be said.

And across all four accounts, in every one of them, the one thing noticeably absent: not one excuse. Peter, at the lowest point of his discipleship, cursing and

swearing and denying the Lord with his own lips — no excuse is offered. No explanation. No blame shifted. The record stands as it is, and God's own word about Peter's restoration stands alongside it. The goodness of God led Peter to repentance. And the face of his Lord finished the work.

And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter... And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.