

Bible Study – Peter's Denial of Jesus

By William Gavin

“Amen I say to you, this very night before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.”

Matthew 26:34

Leader Notes:

Focus: The story of Peter denying Jesus from the Gospel of Luke. We will look at the events of the Last Supper and some other key passages about St. Peter, the Rock, and our first Pope. We will tie in another key story from the Gospel of John where Jesus will show mercy to Peter around another campfire.

Instruction: Anything written italics is a direction or suggestion for the leader. Whatever is written regular text should be read aloud. When possible, have the young people in your group do these readings.

Preparation: Read through the study ahead of time, familiarizing yourself with its content. Pray with the readings from Sacred Scripture. If possible, print out a few copies of the map to share. Have Bibles ready to go (or print out the passages below). Ask your teens to bring their own and have extras available, if possible. We recommend actual Bibles to be used as putting the Bible in the hands of young people is always preferable.

Introduction: Let's focus on the story Peter denying Jesus from the Gospel of Luke. What you may not know is that this denial takes place around a campfire. In order to better comprehend this story, we will look at the events of the Last Supper and some other key passages about St. Peter, the Rock and first Pope of the Church. We will tie in another key story from the Gospel of John where Jesus will show mercy to Peter around another campfire.

Before we begin, let us begin in prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and our hearts to understand His word.

Opening Prayer:

[Begin with sign of the cross]

Holy Spirit, teach us how to pray. Open the eyes of our heart. Free us from the blindness caused by our sin. Free us from the slavery of sin that conceals your word. Gives us a heart aflame with Your love and Your truth. Help us to see and to understand Your word as living and true.

Come, Holy Spirit, enkindle in us the fire of Your word. And let us now pray together the words that Jesus taught us: Our Father...

[End with sign of the cross]

Before beginning, here are some fun facts about fire and light:

- Light moves at full “light speed” — at 186,282.4 miles per second (not per hour) — only in a vacuum. That is like traveling around the earth about 7 ½ times in one second.
- Plato fancied that we see by shooting light rays from our eyes. The Greek philosopher was not completely wrong. Like all living things, humans are actually bioluminescent: namely, we glow. We are brightest during the afternoon, around our lips and cheeks.
- “Photography” means “writing with light.” English astronomer John Herschel, whose father discovered infrared, coined the term.
- Fire fighting was a ‘sport’ at the 1900 Olympic games in Paris (the only time it was part of the Olympics). 😊

Does anyone have a story about their most memorable campfire?

Before reading our main story for this study, here is the context. Jesus has had the Last Supper and predicted that he will be betrayed by one of his followers. He adds that all of his followers will abandon him as well (Matthew 26:31). Peter responds that he will never abandon or deny Jesus (Matthew 26:33). Jesus answers that Peter will deny him not once, but three times that very night.

Shortly after supper Jesus will go with his disciples to a garden just outside the walls of Jerusalem called ‘Gethsemane’. This garden is still there today. In fact, a number of the trees in the garden are the same trees from the time of Christ – olive trees that have been around for over 2000 years!

We are told in all four Gospels that Judas betrayed Jesus and then brought a band of soldiers (John 18:12) to arrest Jesus. At this moment all of the disciples flee, with only John and Jesus following at a distance.

Jesus is brought in before the Sanhedrin for a late-night trial. The Sanhedrin was a group of Jewish religious leaders, a number of whom did not like Jesus and wanted him to be executed by the Romans.

The story we are about to read takes places either during this trial or right before it.

Try to Imagine...

If you can imagine the scene, it will be helpful.

Imagine you are Peter. Your master has just been arrested by a large band of Roman guards. They were likely armed with spears, swords and clubs. They came with torches in the middle of the night and it is still night. There is darkness all around and you, as Peter, are hoping to stay by Jesus’ side – but you are frightened for your own life. You have likely seen people crucified and executed and want no part of that.

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Now you find yourself by a campfire warming yourself with a number of other people. You likely want to stay warm, but also to hear about what is going on. The light of fire lights up your face and now some people recognize you 'as a Galilean – namely, someone from the land of Galilee. Scholars are not sure, but we know from this line that there must have been something different about the way people from Galilee appeared.

They begin to question Peter – which, again, must have been shocking and jarring to say the least.

Here is the story from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 22. We are going to read it twice – try to listen and hear what stands out to you and why. Listen to what line God is leading you to focus upon.

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54 After arresting him they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest; Peter was following at a distance.

55 They lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat around it, and Peter sat down with them.

56 When a maid saw him seated in the light, she looked intently at him and said, "This man too was with him."

57 But he denied it saying, "Woman, I do not know him."

58 A short while later someone else saw him and said, "You too are one of them"; but Peter answered, "My friend, I am not."

59 About an hour later, still another insisted, "Assuredly, this man too was with him, for he also is a Galilean."

60 But Peter said, "My friend, I do not know what you are talking about." Just as he was saying this, the cock crowed,

61 and the Lord turned and looked at Peter; and Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times."

62 He went out and began to weep bitterly.

Interesting note: the Gospel of St. Matthew adds an interesting line – St. Matthew adds that during the third denial Peter 'cursed and swore' while he was denying Christ (Matthew 26: 74).

Questions:

1. What stands out to you about what you just heard?
2. How do you feel about Peter after listening to this story?
3. Can you empathize with him?
4. Why was Peter so weak?
5. What are ways that Christians can 'deny Christ' – in both big and small ways.
6. What are some examples of when it's very difficult to stand up for being a Christian in today's world?
7. Can anyone share a time when they were ridiculed for their faith or felt threatened in some way? Or, if you are willing, could someone share a story of denying their faith/not standing up for the faith when you were given the opportunity.

There is one other campfire that occurs in the Gospels. The word in Greek is ἀνθρακιάν (anthrakian). It occurs in the Gospel of John, chapter 18 – from the scene we just read about Peter denying Christ; and it appears in John chapter 21 – another 'anthrakian' – or campfire – lit on the beach of the Sea of Galilee.

Some interesting notes on this story:

This scene occurs after Jesus has risen from the dead.

The apostles have 'gone back fishing' – thus, even though they have heard Jesus might have risen from the dead, they have gone back to their old ways (including, apparently, not being very good at fishing).

Peter takes several of the other apostles fishing with him and, again, they are not catching anything.

Jesus appears to them and tells them to throw the net to the other side of the boat.

They do so and catch a huge number of fish – 153 total!

They come to shore and find a campfire made – obviously by Jesus. So, yes, Jesus knew how to make campfires as well! ☺

There are some details we will not cover, but will instead read the story of what is considered by many to be the 'reversal of the betrayals' – or, a second chance that Jesus gives Peter to show his love for the Lord.

Here is the story from John 21:

Jesus and Peter.

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs."

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16 He then said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.”

17 He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” [Jesus] said to him, “Feed my sheep.

18 Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

19 He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, “Follow me.”

Questions for discussion:

1. What is the key question that Jesus asks Peter?
 2. Why didn't Jesus ask Peter if he 'believed in him'? What is the more important question? (*Answer: that he loves Jesus.*)
 3. There is an interesting parallel – the third time that Peter denied Jesus he became very angry. Here, again, on the third time when Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?”, Peter gets distressed – a more exact translation would be that what Jesus said ‘grieved’ Peter. Why would Peter be so ‘grieved’ or distressed by what Jesus was asking him? (*Answer: there isn't an exact answer here*)
 4. What will Peter become? Why will this entire story be so important to him being the first Pope and leader of the Church?
 5. Jesus in the Gospel of John, will wash the apostles feet and tell them to do the same. How does that story relate to how Peter is supposed to be as the leader of the Apostles? Note: **There is an ancient legend** that St. Peter had marks under his eyes from all the tears he cried because he never forgot how he had betrayed Christ – but also because he never forgot how Christ had forgave him along the Sea of Galilee. Ponder that image for a moment.
 6. What does all of this have to do with you and I as Christians and as disciples of Jesus Christ? What lessons should we walk away with personally?
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We are going to end now with a reading and then final prayer. Before doing so, who can share some insights or one thing they want to hold onto from this Scripture study?

Share personal insights or thoughts.

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A reading from St. Paul's first letter to St. Timothy: (1 Timothy 1:12-17)

12 I am grateful to him who has strengthened me, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he considered me trustworthy in appointing me to the ministry.

13 I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and an arrogant man, but I have been mercifully treated because I acted out of ignorance in my unbelief.

14 Indeed, the grace of our Lord has been abundant, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

15 This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost.

16 But for that reason I was mercifully treated, so that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in him for everlasting life.

17 To the king of ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God, honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Closing Prayer:

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, keep us safe from all pride and arrogance. Help us to accept ourselves as your creature – created by you for an eternal purpose. Keep us humble in your service and never let us be parted from you. Forgive us for the times we have denied you and for the times when we have even betrayed you. We ask for your mercy and forgiveness. Help us, too, not to despair when we have fallen; but to trust always in you and your son who is the inexhaustible font of mercy. Jesus, we trust in you. Jesus we hope in you. Jesus, we love you. We pray all this as we pray together the words that you taught us. Our Father...