

# Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

## Contradictions in Scripture: The Denials of Peter

It has long been a troubling thing to those who read and are familiar with Scripture to find that, among the four gospels, not one of them lists the disciple Simon Peter's three denials of Christ the same way. They all list three denials, but a quick comparison of them will be sufficient to show that they are in no way the same. Let us examine the three denials as they are given in Scripture to see that this is the case. Let us take the gospels in order, first considering those listed in Matthew.

### **Matthew 1.** Matthew 26:69-70.

69. *Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him, saying, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee."*

70. *But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are saying."*

### **Matthew 2.** Matthew 26:71-72.

71. *And when he had gone out to the gateway, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth."*

72. *But again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the Man!"*

### **Matthew 3.** Matthew 26:73-74.

73. *And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you."*

74. *Then he began to curse and swear, saying, "I do not know the Man!"*

*Immediately a rooster crowed.*

Next, we will consider the three denials listed in Mark.

### **Mark 1.** Mark 14:66-68.

66. *Now as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came. 67. And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with Jesus of Nazareth."*

68. *But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are saying." And he went out on the porch, and a rooster crowed.*

### **Mark 2.** Mark 14:69-70a.

69. *And the servant girl saw him again, and began to say to those who stood by, "This is one of them." 70. But he denied it again.*

### **Mark 3.** Mark 14:70b-71.

*And a little later those who stood by said to Peter again, "Surely you are one of them; for you are a Galilean, and your speech shows it."*

71. *Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this Man of whom you speak!"*

So far, these accounts seem fairly similar. The only notable difference is that in Matthew, a different servant girl than the one at the fire saw him and caused the second denial, whereas in Mark, the same servant girl as at the fire saw him. Yet the discrepancies become more serious when we get to Luke.

**Luke 1.** Luke 22:56-57.

*56. And a certain servant girl, seeing him as he sat by the fire, looked intently at him and said, "This man was also with Him."*

*57. But he denied Him, saying, "Woman, I do not know Him."*

**Luke 2.** Luke 22:58.

*58. And after a little while another saw him and said, "You also are of them."*

*But Peter said, "Man, I am not!"*

**Luke 3.** Luke 22:59-60.

*59. Then after about an hour had passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, "Surely this fellow also was with Him, for he is a Galilean."*

*60. But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying!"*

*Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed.*

Again, the difficulty here arises with the second denial. In Matthew and Luke, the second denial was to a servant girl, although there appeared to be some confusion about whether or not she was the same girl as at the fire or not. Here, however, Peter calls the one he is speaking to a "man." How can this be the same denial? Does this not appear to be a contradiction? Yet things get far more difficult when we get to the final gospel, John, and the denials as listed there.

**John 1.** John 18:17.

*17. Then the servant 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."*

**John 2.** John 18:25.

*25. Now Simon Peter stood and warmed himself. Therefore they said to him, "You are not also one of His disciples, are you?"*

*He denied it and said, "I am not!"*

**John 3.** John 18:26-27.

*26. One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of him whose ear Peter cut off, said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" 27. Peter then denied again; and immediately a rooster crowed.*

Here, we have the biggest differences of all. Matthew, Mark, and Luke were all unanimous in declaring that the first denial took place while Peter warmed himself at the fire, and Matthew informed us that the second took place after he had left the fire. Yet in John, the first denial takes place while Peter is coming in the door into the courtyard of the high priest, and not when he got to the fire at all. John has the second denial as taking place at the fire, whereas Matthew says he already left the fire when the second denial took place. Clearly, the gospels are in contradiction regarding multiple details of these three denials.

Thus those who have set themselves up in arms against the Scriptures believe that here they have one of their most deadly pieces of ammunition. After all, this is an obvious discrepancy, is it not? And who hasn't heard of the denials of Peter? Is there any way that one who wishes to be honest to the truth and to the Scriptures can explain such a disturbing problem?

In making an attempt to arrive at the truth of these passages, I took my Bible and carefully went through all four gospels and examined the four passages involved. In doing this, I made note not only of the three denials of Peter, but also of the predictions of Christ that Peter would deny Him.

In examining these predictions, we come upon the clue that will clear up the mystery of the different denials for us. Let us next examine each of Christ's predictions of Peter's denials in the four gospels. Again, we will go in gospel order, so our first prediction is in Matthew 26:30-35.

Matthew 26:30. *And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

31. *Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written:*

*'I will strike the Shepherd,  
And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'*

32. *But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee."*

33. *Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble."*

34. *Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."*

35. *Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!"*

*And so said all the disciples.*

Mark 14:26. *And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

27. *Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written:*

*'I will strike the Shepherd,  
And the sheep will be scattered.'*

28. *"But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee."*

29. *Peter said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be."*

30. *Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that today, even this night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times."*

31. *But he spoke more vehemently, "If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!"*

*And they all said likewise.*

Luke 22:31. *And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. 32. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."*

33. *But he said to Him, "Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death."*

34. *Then He said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster shall not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me."*

John 13:33. *Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, 'Where I am going, you cannot come,' so now I say to you. 34. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

36. *Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?"*

*Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward."*

37. *Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake."*

38. *Jesus answered him, "Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times."*

Let us make a summary of each gospel's prediction, so we can easily get the facts before us. I have reordered these in chronological order, for one thing that should be clear from reading and comparing the three passages above is that the Lord predicted Peter's denials multiple times throughout that night. This seems to have been an ongoing argument between them, with the Lord insisting that Peter was going to deny Him, and with Peter insisting that he would never do that. So here we have the denials, in as close to the right order as we can get them. It is hard to tell for

certain the order between 1 and 2 and between 3 and 4, so I have just listed them in reverse gospel order.

**Prediction 1. John 13:38.** Immediately after Judas Iscariot had received the bread from Christ and gone out (13:30), and before they went out (14:31) and entered the garden (18:1). Brought about by Jesus telling Peter that he could not follow Him where He was going (13:36). Peter asked why he could not follow now rather than later (13:37), and claimed that he would lay down his life for Christ's sake. Christ predicted that the rooster would not crow until he had denied Him three times (13:38).

**Prediction 2. Luke 22:34.** While they were still sitting at supper (22:14), immediately after the argument as to who would be greater (22:24), and before they went to the Mount of Olives (22:39). Brought about by Jesus revealing to Peter that Satan had sought that he might be able to sift him as wheat, but that the Lord had prayed for him that his faith should not fail, and that when he had returned he should strengthen his brethren (22:31-32). Peter confidently asserted that he would go to prison and even to death with the Lord (22:33). Christ predicted that he would deny three times that he knew Him before the rooster crowed that day (22:34). No protestation of Peter to this prediction is mentioned.

**Prediction 3. Mark 14:30.** After they had left supper and gone to the Mount of Olives (14:26). Brought about by Jesus predicting that all of them would be made to stumble because of Him (14:27). Peter denied that he would stumble even if everyone else did (14:29). Christ predicted that that night, before the rooster crowed twice, Peter would deny Him three times (14:30). Peter spoke more vehemently, and insisted that he would never deny Him even if he had to die, and all the other disciples agreed with him (14:31).

**Prediction 4. Matthew 26:34.** After they had left supper and gone to the Mount of Olives (26:30). Brought about by Jesus predicting to them that all of them would be made to stumble because of Him (26:31). Peter denied that he would stumble even if everyone else did (26:33). Christ predicted that that night, before the rooster crowed, Peter would deny Him three times (26:34). Peter asserted that he would never deny Him even if he had to die, and all the other disciples agreed with him (26:35).

From comparing these predictions, it is clear that there are at least two predictions, since John and Luke talk about the Lord predicting Peter's denials at the last supper, whereas Matthew and Mark talk about Him predicting his denials after they had left for the Mount of Olives. It also seems clear that the two predictions at the supper listed in John and Luke are different, as they have different antecedents, the first happening after the Lord said He was going where they could not follow, and the second after the Lord revealed that Satan had desired to have Peter, but that He had prayed for his faith not to fail. The two predictions after they left the supper sound similar in their antecedents, however, so we might think that these two predictions are the same, and so the Lord predicted Peter's denials only three times this night, except for one glaring difference in detail between Matthew and Mark. That is, in Matthew the Lord predicts that Peter will deny his Lord three times before the rooster crows ONCE, whereas in Mark He predicts that Peter will deny his Lord three times before the rooster crows TWICE.

Now if this is the case, then three times before one crow is three denials, and three times before the second crow is another three denials, and our total of denials is actually six denials! Yet if Peter denied the Lord six times and each gospel only lists three denials, then it would not be at all necessary for each gospel to list the same three denials, for each gospel author had six denials to choose from. So in this passage once again we find that our whole problem in imagining a discrepancy is that we believe that Peter had to have only denied Christ three times before the rooster crowed once, when really he denied him three times before the first crow and another three times before the second.

Now let us consider the denials we quoted above with this idea in mind to see if we can fit Peter's denials together into six denials rather than three, and in doing so if we can eliminate any

contradictions in this passage. When I put these together this way, I compared gospel with gospel, determining which denials could not by any stretch of the imagination be the same and the others which undoubtedly were the same. Then I fit them all together as best I could, checking time and again to make sure that I was not missing anything or putting anything out of its place. Below I have listed the results of my careful study. It was clearer in my opinion if I categorized the denials by who made the original accusation, so that is how I have listed them below. The denials, as near as I can piece them together, are as follows:

**Denial 1.)** John 18:17. By the servant girl keeping the door as Peter and John were entering the high priest's palace.

**Denial 2.)** Matthew 26:69-70, Mark 14:66-68, Luke 22:56-57, John 18:25. By a servant girl warming herself along with the men at the fire. (In John, we have the added detail that the others at the fire joined her in her accusation, so when Peter denied, he denied to her and to them.)

**Denial 3.)** Luke 22:58, John 18:26-27. At the fire, by a kinsman of the man whose ear Peter cut off. (Thus John is the only gospel that lists all of the first set of three denials.)

**Crow I.)** Mark 14:68, John 18:27. The first rooster crows, but Peter does not seem to notice. Peter leaves the fire and goes out to the porch by the gate.

**Denial 4.)** Matthew 26:71-72. By a different servant from the one at the fire, who sees him standing by the gate.

**Denial 5.)** Mark 14:69-70a. By the same servant girl who saw him at the fire who now sees him standing by the gate. (There is no way I can tell to determine which order 4 and 5 are in, so I put them in this order so that the same servant girl who was at the fire caused the middle denial of both sets of three.)

**Denial 6.)** Matthew 26:73-74, Mark 14:70b-71, Luke 22:59-60. After Peter had been standing by the gate for about an hour, by a group of men who were also standing at the gate. This time, Peter begins to curse and swear in his final denial of the Lord.

**Crow II.)** Matthew 26:74, Mark 14:72, Luke 22:60. The rooster crows the second time. The Lord turns and looks at Peter, and he remembers all that the Lord had said to him. This time, he runs away from the palace out of the city and weeps bitterly.

If you will follow these occurrences through, you will see that they fit almost perfectly, the only sticking point being that I have assumed the "they" of John means that others at the fire joined the servant girl in her accusation, for which I have no Scriptural statement of proof. Yet this seems likely enough to not be a problem in my mind. This way of looking at the denials fits all of what Scripture says together, keeps all of it true, and removes any imagined "discrepancy."

Thus it can be seen that the predictions of Peter's denials listed in each gospel are not all the same. The key prophecy is in Mark, which tells us that Peter denied the Lord a second set of three times. If we ignore the words of Mark that Peter would deny Christ three times before the cock crowed the SECOND time, we will never understand why there should be six denials rather than three. But once we understood that Christ predicted SIX denials for Peter, not three, then all of our difficulties will disappear, and the order and place of the six denials will become clear to us.

Thus we see Scripture once again vindicated. At the same time, we see a beautiful conjunction of the four gospels that only could have been conceived of by a single, inspiring mind Who was writing through the four, human authors of these books. Three authors writing using an imaginary "Q" manuscript as their source material cannot explain the harmonious differences between these gospels, all of which fit together to tell one, complete story. This method of giving different details in the different books, all of which fit together to tell one, complete story, is an interesting and exciting reality. It shows us the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit behind the different human authors

of the gospels. This kind of supplemental material and harmonious detail in Scripture shows that these gospels really were written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

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