

What Was Peter Thinking?

Tonight, I want to begin by telling you a little bit about something that happened to me. This is a picture of me in Egypt. I was part of Operation Brightstar one year, and had the opportunity to take a tour of Giza after training. Giza is a section of Cairo where the famous Pyramid of Khufu and the Sphinx are located. With terrorism a very real threat, we were warned to stay with the group and the bodyguards assigned to us.

While in front of the pyramid complex, a couple of locals with a camel approached the group and offered a chance to get pictures on the camel. I assumed that if they were trouble, the bodyguards would have sent them away. Since they did not turn these guys away, I decided to give it a try. I figured I would just get on, get pictures taken and get off. I was quite surprised when the locals took off at a sprint, leading the camel with me on it across the desert a good distance from the rest of the group.

I could have jumped off, and repeatedly told myself to do so. But I remained on the camel. Not out of fear, as I had recently completed airborne training and this would have been nothing compared to falls I took there. I stayed on because I could never decide that it was the best choice. Instead, I kept looking behind me to see if anyone in the group noticed I was gone. Thoughts were running through my head so fast I could not process any of it. I was embarrassed at being a fool. I was worried if this was a kidnapping. I was trying to remember if they told me they would take me out in the desert. I felt betrayed that no one seemed to notice or care I was gone. I was angry at the bodyguards for not chasing them away. I was sizing them up to see if I could take them on (this may seem ridiculous for those who see me today, but 30 years ago I was very much in fighting shape). I was trying to remember what pictures were already on the camera in case I wouldn't get it back from them. I was hoping someone would be coming after us. Many other thoughts undoubtedly went through my mind that I have forgotten over the decades.

I was simultaneously suffering from cognitive dissonance and from information overload. My understanding of reality was suddenly ripped away from me, and a flood of emotions and thoughts came in to try to reestablish some sense of normalcy. Everyone goes through this at different times in their lives, and this state of mind can be deadly. When the mind is given too many choices, it tends to shut down. This is why in driving school you are told to use the same foot for both the brake and gas pedals: in a crisis situation you do not want to have to make a choice of which foot to react with. In a crisis situation, you want one, and only one, option so you won't waste valuable time thinking about it.

So, what has this to do with anything? Well, I believe Saint Peter likewise experienced cognitive dissonance and information overload is what is probably the most famous betrayal in history.

Now, I am not suggesting that Peter was not afraid, as is commonly explained. He most certainly was. Only a fool would not have been afraid given his situation. But if fear was the only emotion he struggled with, he would have had only one option available to him: he would have gone into hiding when Jesus was taken away from Gethsemane. If fear was all there was to the story of Peter's betrayal, there would have been no betrayal because Peter would not have been at the fire to betray Jesus.

The cognitive dissonance he went through is easy to see. Peter went to the garden with a sword, and used it. He was not only prepared to fight, but he actually tried to start one. He was expecting a

military salvation of Israel. When Jesus not only told him to stop fighting, but repaired the damage done, Peter's view of reality was ripped apart. There is no explicit Biblical evidence of information overload for Peter, so what I say next will be purely opinion. Yet my opinions here are based on facts as told to us by scripture.

With his reality torn apart, it would be natural for Peter to try to make sense of how the Kingdom of Jesus could come without the followers of Jesus having to fight. Perhaps he thought of the teachings of the prophets, and began to hope that angels would suddenly come down in legions. Perhaps the devil whispered in Peter's ear that Jesus was just another false Messiah after all. Looking back to the strong faith Peter had in his other escapades, I've no doubt this suggestion would have met strong resistance at first.

But as the minutes turned to hours, and as dawn approached, the angelic host never showed up to save the day. It must have become increasingly obvious that the new reality he tried to construct was also wrong. Hope may have turned to despair. And in his despair, what if Jesus being a false Messiah was true? Did Peter feel guilty for abandoning his father and the family business that relied on him? Was he afraid of what might happen to his wife if he were to be killed? Remember, widows were looked at as damaged goods in those days. With Peter unsure of what reality was, with worries of him failing family and friends, Satan saw the time was right. With Peter likely attempting to shut out the rest of the world to piece together all that was happening, his inner turmoil was interrupted by the accusing voices of the others around the fire. Peter was in no state of mind to make a choice, yet he was forced to do just that.

Now, I am not trying to justify Peter's behavior any more than I am trying to justify mine. In neither case did either of us do the right thing. What I am trying to do is help others to understand what went on. Understanding, even imperfect understanding, is necessary for forgiveness to have any meaning. The perfect understanding of Jesus allows for God's perfect forgiveness. I could be mad at myself for being so foolish, but I choose to find peace by forgiving myself after self-reflection on what went wrong. Jesus was able to perfectly forgive Peter (as well as all of us) because He has perfect understanding.

But forgiveness itself is not enough. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we see that the father was on constant vigil in hopes the son would return. The father already forgave the son, but the son had to turn around to benefit from this forgiveness. This turning around is called a "conversion." Forgiving myself was not enough. The understanding I had of the event could just as easily have led me to blame others for my mistake. Without this conversion on my part, understanding would only lead to bitterness. Peter's outward sign of conversion was, after hearing the first gospel from Mary Magdalene, to race to the tomb in the hope of finding Jesus there. But Jesus wasn't there when Peter arrived, and so we have one more step left.

If we turn back to God, He will accept us back. But the damage done is still there. There has to be some restitution. There is a price to be paid. I paid an exorbitant amount of cash for a picture that is now a symbol of my humiliation. Peter had to say he loved Jesus three times, once for each betrayal. These may seem like small prices to pay, and they were. The price the prodigal son had to pay was much higher, as he no longer had an inheritance. He had to either rely on his brother's generosity (if he could) or create his own fortune before his father would pass away. But even this price pales in comparison to the damage done in breaking our relationship with God through sin.

Death is the true price for sin. Jesus did not sin, but died anyway. In doing so, death forfeited

its right to claim sinners. As death no longer has a right to claim us, we are allowed eternal life. It is only by choice that we may go to Hell. This is what God did for us on Good Friday. He paid the price He knew we never could. And it is a lesson clearly played out by Peter in the gospels.

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