**Peter’s Denials:**

**An Examination of the Narratives**

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NT 520: New Testament Introduction

December 15, 2008

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**Introduction**

The Gospel accounts of Peter’s denials contain many difficulties which have been frequently cited as contradictions. Harmonization of these narratives has been a matter of debate for many years. Arthur Write, at the close of the nineteenth century, declared, “The Gospels have so mixed up the various incidents that their statements are often confused.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Such instances of supposed Scriptural contradictions are used today by those who seek to ridicule literal interpretations of the Bible. In denying the historical accuracy of the Gospels, James Barr says, “Harmonization [of the gospels] through the production of multiple events is the most thoroughly laughable of all devices of interpretation.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The questions regarding a harmonization of Peter’s denials directly relate to the prophecy given by the Lord Jesus Christ regarding those denials. The predictive statements of Christ must be evaluated like all other prophecies on the basis of Deuteronomy 18:22: “When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him*.”*[[3]](#footnote-3)Both the credibility of the Lord’s prophecy and the credibility of the Bible as God’s revelation are at stake. Paul Feinberg has correctly evaluated the importance of this issue when he states, “The truth of his word will be demonstrated in the fulfillment or failure of his words . . . the prophet is accredited by the *total, absolute* truthfulness of his words.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

It is therefore important to understand that the Gospel accounts of Peter’s denials are inerrant, and that there is no valid basis for the claim that the differences in the narratives constitute inconsistency. Yet to appreciate why this is so, readers must first acknowledge that inerrancy does not imply total recall of an event, nor does selective or artistic omission constitute inconsistency. Certain points were omitted by each Gospel, and the statements made by the writers of the Gospels do not present an exhaustive account of every word spoken on the night of Peter’s denials.[[5]](#footnote-5) Far from inconsistent, however, the Gospels are complementary, with each Gospel adding to and fleshing out editorial elisions and omissions in other Gospels. This is why harmonization is necessary, and why interpolating the Gospels provides a more full – yet consistent – understanding of the events of the night Peter denied his Lord.

**The Location of the Denials**

The first supposed discrepancy among the Gospel narratives regards location. The three synoptic accounts (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) place Peter’s denials in the courtyard of Caiaphas’ house, while John apparently places them at the house of Annas. Luke 22:53 records, “And they led Jesus away to the high priest*.*”Matthew 26:57 identifies Caiaphas as the high priest. The problem becomes more difficult when compared to John’s account: “the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound him, and led him to Annas first.” There is no doubt that Jesus was taken to Annas first, for John is very clear in his statement of this fact.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, the question of whether Jesus remained there for His first interrogation or whether He was sent immediately to Caiaphas to be first examined by him, must be determined.

Although the argument is correct that Annas was the most influential high priest of his time and was influential long after he was compelled to retire, John 18:13 makes it all too clear that Caiaphas was high priest *that year*. He is the one who holds the office that John is speaking about. A. E. Breen explains that,

St. John is very precise to determine the identity of the high priest; and then in the following verse he tells us that Jesus was brought before the high priest. By all the laws of human speech a writer is obliged to mean one and the same individual by such a sequence of statements. St. John has never told us that Annas was considered as the high priest; he has implicitly told us that he was not the high priest. He has told us with great clearness the name and character of the high priest. In all his Gospel there is but one high priest and that man is Caiaphas.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Alfred Edersheim states, “No account is given of what passed before Annas. Peter and evidently John, followed Him into the palace of the high priest – that is, into the palace of Caiaphas, not of Annas.”[[8]](#footnote-8) George G. Findlay says, “The captors of Jesus take Him to the father-in-law, only to find that he shifts on to the son-in-law the entire responsibility of the case.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Friedrich Blass evaluates this text as follows: “After having distinctly told that Caiaphas was the high priest that year, and not Annas, we read that the other disciples went in with Jesus into the place of the high priest. Whose palace, therefore? Of course that of Caiaphas.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

The judgments of Breen, Edersheim, Findlay, and Blass are borne out by the Gospel of John itself. The language of John 18:13 -- “Caiaphas who was high priest that year” -- and John 18:19 -- “then the high priest questioned Jesus” -- indicates that Caiaphas is the only high priest intended by John. This is in harmony with Luke and the other Gospels.

A second difficulty is presented in John 18:24, which comes after the account of Peter’s denial of Christ in the courtyard of Caiaphas, and the account of the examination of Christ by Caiaphas in the same place (John 18:15). The statement, “Annas therefore sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest*,”* has driven some commentators to the hypothesis that verse 19 describes an informal examination of Christ before Annas. However, this has been shown in the previous paragraphs not to be the correct understanding of the text.

The difficulty is dissolved when the aorist indicative Ἀπέστειλεν, “*he sent*” (v. 24), is translated as a pluperfect referring to what *had been done* prior to verse 15. The correct translation would then be, “Now Annas had sent him . . .” (KJV). Regarding this use of the aorist, Burton says, “The Aorist Indicative is frequently used in narrative passages of a past event which precedes another past even mentioned or implied in the context.”[[11]](#footnote-11)  Burton further explains that this is a common use of the Greek aorist. From the point of view of Greek grammar, this is simply a historical aorist.[[12]](#footnote-12) This use of the aorist is also supported by A. T. Robertson, Basil Gildersleeve, G. B. Winer, and William Goodwin.[[13]](#footnote-13) As Breen explains, it is grammatically correct to translate verse 24 as a belated remark:

The writer proceeds to group events together until he arrives at a point where the clearness of the account demands the statement of some detail which had been omitted in the chronological order. Then a sentence is inserted in the account whose verb is generally in the aorist, and in sense is equivalent to the pluperfect tense. Such statements carry the mind back, and certify it on some fact which is required for full understanding of the narrative.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Not only is such an interpretation grammatically correct and reasonable in view of the text, it is also characteristic of John’s Gospel. Other examples are found in John 6:71; 11:2, 51; 18:2b, 10b, 14, 18.

Edersheim concludes that “John 18:24 is an intercalated notice, referring to what had previously been recorded in vv. 15-23.”[[15]](#footnote-15)  This is the most logical conclusion. It is in complete agreement with Matthew 26:57, 58 which tells us that Peter followed Jesus into the court of Caiaphas. Therefore all four Gospels are in agreement that both the primary examination of Christ and the denials of Peter occurred in the courtyard of Caiaphas, the high priest. The Gospel narratives of Peter’s denials have thus far been shown to hold no incorrect records.

**The First Denial**

To the reader, John seems to assign the first challenge to Peter and his first denial of Christ at the point of his admittance to the courtyard. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, however, place the first challenge to Peter as he warms himself at the fire, presumably well within the courtyard and after he has gained entrance to it. Luke 22:55 explains, *“*After they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter was sitting among them*”* (NASV). John, however, does not state that the doorkeeper asked her question at the gate of the courtyard. Nevertheless, some commentators understand that to be the meaning which John intends to convey.

There are several plausible explanations to this problem, none of which locate Peter at the point of entry to the courtyard. Lenski says that the synoptic Gospels (Mark 14:66) indicate that the doorkeeper left her post at the entry in charge of another maid. She then came over to Peter, fixed her eyes upon him, and declared who he really was. Lenski states, “This must have occurred sometime after she let Peter in at John’s request.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Hendriksen also gives a reasonable description of the scene from the composite picture presented by the Gospels. He describes the incident this way:

It would seem at the very moment when Peter had entered the palace, the portress, viewing him from her nook in the vestibule, had her suspicions. The fact that she had admitted him at the request of John seemed to indicate that Peter too was a disciple of Jesus. The uneasiness that could be read on his face confirms her suspicions. So, about to be relieved by another gatekeeper, she walks toward Peter, who has already entered the open courtyard, and who, in the light of the fire by which he is warming himself, is clearly visible (Luke 22:56). She fixes her eyes on him. Then, stepping even closer, she says to him, ‘You too were with Jesus the Nazarene.’[[17]](#footnote-17)

Such a composite picture can be legitimately drawn because none of the statements are actually contradictory.

Leon Morris offers the helpful observation that John does not always narrate events in strict sequence.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is also seen in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew with regard to the temptations of Christ in the wilderness. While Matthew lists the devil’s temptation on the pinnacle of the temple as the third temptation, Luke places it second in the sequence. Of course this has nothing to do with error for there is no emphasis placed on chronological order. With this precedent in mind, Breen’s explanation of the location of the first denial seems like a reasonable view. He says:

If we transpose the order of the first two denials recorded by John, a more probable solution results. By this adjustment of the order, the first denial takes place at the fire in all the evangelists . . . If we adopt this transposition, then, in all the writers, the second denial happens on the porch. It is called forth by the portress. This also adds to the probability for no other maid would be so apt to be in that place . . . The place of the third denial is not mentioned by any of the writers. It seems quite probable that Peter, now alarmed by the repeated charges, did not go back to the fire.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Since inerrancy does not demand chronological precision, Breen’s account is plausible, particularly so because it situates the first denial at the fire. Lenski and Hendriksen also set the first denial at the fire, but it should be noted that transposing John’s narrative is not necessary in order to harmonize the Gospel accounts of the first denial.

While the substantial truth is the presence of the apostle at the fire, it is true that Luke and Mark picture Peter as *sitting* with the officers, while John says that he was *standing* with them. (Matthew does not mention the fire). Breen reasonably states, “It is evident that a man in such a condition would at one time be standing, and at another time be sitting.”[[20]](#footnote-20)  Hendriksen also sees the element of time which must be considered. He reasons, “This surely need not be a contradiction. Is it not reasonable to assume that, after sitting down a little while, he had risen? . . . We may also safely assume that after the first denial he remained standing a while, looking for an avenue of escape. Then he started for the archway.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Certainly no contradiction exists with regard to Peter’s sitting and then standing. To stand would be a reasonable response to the maid’s questioning his identity. All difficulties of this nature can be understood when compared to any chronicle of history. Paul Feinberg recognizes this when he states,

Inerrancy does not demand historical or semantic precision . . . Precision is an ambiguous term. Almost any historical or linguistic sentence is capable of greater precision. Any historiography, even if one writes a chronicle, is still only an approximation. If we record an event as having transpired in 1978, we could always have said it more precisely, in the month of May, May 15th, or May 15th at 10:00 p.m. and so on. The crucial point as I see it for inerrancy is this. Is the sentence as stated true? If so, then there is no problem.[[22]](#footnote-22)

A similar difficulty is observed as Mark records Peter’s location as “*below***”** in thecourtyard(14:66), and Matthew has “*outside”* in the courtyard (26:69). A solution to this matter can be achieved by understanding the construction of the houses in Palestine. A number of rooms were often built around three sides of a courtyard. The larger and more comfortable ancient houses had two stories arranged around a courtyard.[[23]](#footnote-23) The palace of Caiaphas had halls big enough to serve for informal meetings of the Sanhedrin.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Since the courtyard was open (without a roof), the term “*outside*” would be a reasonable choice for Matthew. Mark’s use of “*below*” would then indicate that the interrogation of Jesus was taking place in a room *above* the courtyard.[[25]](#footnote-25)  What are often thought to be contradicting accounts are merely views of the same location from two different perspectives.

**The Second Denial**

Matthew records in verse 71 that the second denial came when Peter had gone out to the (πυλῶνα) “gateway.” Mark 14:68 plots Peter’s position to be in the (προαύλιον) “porch.” Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker give the same basic definition for both words.[[26]](#footnote-26) Lange, while discussing the second denial, states, *“‘into the porch,’* or, according to Matthew, the *‘entrance hall.’* It is the same idea.”[[27]](#footnote-27) These are two terms describing the same location. Mark chose to describe that portion of the palace as the προαύλιον. Matthew used πυλῶνα. In the same way Lenski uses the terms “vestibule,” “forecourt,” and “entryway” and describes that place as the long, covered passage leading out from the courtyard, through the front side of the building into the street.[[28]](#footnote-28) Jeremias refers to this as a “gatehouse.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Bratcher and Nida use “porch” and “gateway.” Their description is the same: “This is the gateway that leads from the courtyard out into the street.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

The composite Gospel account suggests that the second challenge came from several persons. Matthew 26:71 records, “And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, ‘This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth.’” Mark corroborates Matthew’s testimony, attesting that “[Peter] went out into the porch; and the cock crew. And a maid saw him again, and began to say to them that stood by, ‘This is one of them.’” (Mark 14:68-69). Yet Luke ignores the maid’s accusation and depicts Peter responding instead to a man’s denunciation: “And after a little while another saw him, and said, ‘Thou art also one of them.’ And Peter said, ‘Man, I am not.’” (Luke 22:58).

Commentators Harold Lindsell, Robert Govett, John Lawrence, Robert Thomas, Stanley Gundry, and H. L. Willmington correctly evaluate that Peter’s unfaithfulness to the Lord involved more than three spoken denials.[[31]](#footnote-31) Charles Smith adds further clarification when he explains that, “The easiest solution is to recognize that several interrogators may have been involved in eliciting each of the denials.”[[32]](#footnote-32) In other words, Christ’s prophecy of Peter’s three denials should not be construed as predicting three distinct *utterances* of denial. Instead the prophecy should be regarded as foretelling three *episodes* or three separate *instances* in which Peter would deny him. Each episode or instance comprised several speeches to different interlocutors. Thus, on three occasions Peter denied Jesus, but his particular speeches during these occasions were many and various.

Accordingly, a problem may be seen in this second interrogation only if one person were asking Peter about his being a disciple. The best indication that there was more than one person interrogating Peter on this occasion is the choice of the verb tense which Mark records. The verb ἠρνεῖτο, “he was denying,” is the imperfect tense. This portrays the denial as being repeated (14:70). In that same verse the use of πάλιν, “again,” is an intimation that Peter may have given repeated answers on the first occasion of denying also.

The interrogation occurring at this second denial would reasonably develop in the following sequence. Mark refers to “the (same) maid” and states that she, “once again” spoke to the bystanders. This same maid who accused Peter at the fire followed him out to the porch, where she accused him again. Her accusations attracted the attention of others at the gateway, and Luke 22:58 now adds that someone else ἕτερος (masculine), saw him. He said, “You are one of them, too.” Peter’s short reply, “Man, I am not,” serves to express his annoyance.[[33]](#footnote-33) Lenski offers a good summary of Peter’s situation at the gateway:

Luke writes ἕτερος, masculine, “*another man*” saw him, but there is no contradiction when one keeps the situation in mind. Peter had been exposed, and the matter was talked about. In the entryway, especially on a night like this, more than one maid would be on duty. Peter runs into two maids and a man, all three of whom are certain that he is a disciple of Jesus.[[34]](#footnote-34)

One must conclude that there are no discrepancies in the narratives of the second denial. The imperfect ἠρνεῖτο of Mark 14:70 would indicate that the action continued for some time. A full account is acquired by reviewing all the versions together. They all relate the truth. There is no conflict between the doctrine of inerrancy and the facts recorded in the second denial narratives.

**The Third Denial**

None of the Gospels state specifically the location of this last episode of Peter’s denial. We can assume it is still somewhere inside the palace of Caiaphas since Luke 22:62 states that after this occasion, Peter *went outside* and wept. Hendriksen believes that the crowd in the porch refused to allow Peter to exit, and he therefore returned to the open courtyard.[[35]](#footnote-35) It seems to be in this more congested area that Peter’s different manner of speaking is recognized. The location of this denial is therefore not a matter of difficulty. Perhaps the only apparent conflict regarding Peter’s final experience is that of the time of its occurring. All other matters seem to involve data which do not contradict.

The other three Gospels supplement Luke’s account in identifying the questions. Their accounts readily harmonize. Gerhardsson states, “In the third episode Peter is *accosted* [emphasis added] by several persons . . . they express their accusation and provide a basis for it.[[36]](#footnote-36) This group which brings forth the outburst of charges is made up of “*the bystanders*,” mentioned in Matthew 26:73 and Mark 14:70; “*another man*,” reported by Luke 22:59; and “*a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off*,” identified in John 18:26. The input from all four accounts is necessary to make the scene complete. Hendriksen explains, “Some people are talking to Peter; others are talking about him. Accusations are flying in from every side. This was enough to get anyone excited.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

The reason for their confident identification of Peter as a Galilean (Mark 14:70; Luke 22:59) is the manner of his speech (Matthew 26:73). A.T. Robertson believes that Peter’s distinctive brogue was probably a Galilean accent of Aramaic.[[38]](#footnote-38) Dalman says that Peter was recognized as a Galilean on the strength of a few words. For this reason he was termed a companion of Jesus. It must therefore be inferred that Jesus was likewise recognizable by His language.[[39]](#footnote-39) Dalman further explains that in the use of the Galilean dialect, “there was nothing in any way inviting disparagement towards Jesus or His disciples. It is true that only certain signs of more advanced development as compared with the Judean dialect may be detected in it.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

This information points to a more *positive* recognition of Peter’s relationship to Christ. It was not just an opinion regarding several guttural sounds, but rather a solid fact based on particular words spoken. Peter, no doubt, recognized the danger he was in. The absolute positivity of the charge comes to a climax when John’s Gospel mentions the eyewitness to Peter’s presence in the garden with Jesus. The emphatic ἐγώ, “*I with my own eyes . . .,”* is an indication of the sureness of this man’s charge.[[41]](#footnote-41) This is a stronger proof. The many-sided attack of confident charges drove Peter to attempt an equally emphatic response.

Matthew and Mark tell that Peter’s response of cursing and swearing was immediate and continuous (ἤρξατο, imperfect). Regarding the intensity of the response, Calvin says, “In this third denial, Peter’s unfaithfulness to his Master reached its utmost height.”[[42]](#footnote-42) His denial was sharpened in the second episode by an oath. The apex is reached now in this third encounter as Peter begins to curse and swear. Helmut Merkel sees Peter’s cursing as directed against Christ.[[43]](#footnote-43) Lane, however, correctly points out that the statement is intentionally left without an object in the Greek text. This denotes that he cursed himself if he is lying and those present if they insist on asserting that he is a disciple.[[44]](#footnote-44) Wuest explains, “The Jews had a practice of laying themselves under a curse (Acts 23:12). Paul, in Galatians 1:8, 9 calls the divine curse (same word) down upon those who preached a different Gospel than the true one . . . The word “swear” is the same word found in Hebrews 13:11 where God is said to swear, that is to put Himself under oath.”[[45]](#footnote-45) The term “*to swear*” has the meaning of a solemn protestation of the truth of his assertion.[[46]](#footnote-46) There is no idea of vulgarity or profanity on Peter’s part.[[47]](#footnote-47)  Peter, having suddenly found himself in a dangerous situation, made an all-out effort to convince those with whom he is arguing.

The flurry had started quickly, and before Peter was able to complete his remarks, he was aware of the rooster crowing. It appears that Peter had been able to make a quick reply to each attack, and was involved in answering the man mentioned in Luke 22:60, when the crowing of the rooster occurred. The argument ended, as quickly as it had begun. While the other Gospels record only one crowing, Mark more precisely records this cock-crowing as the second to have occurred that night, most likely around 1:30 a.m. But what is a time indicator for one reading the Scriptures was an aid to memory for Peter, recalling the words of Jesus predicting this very moment. In this instant, the mood completely changes. Peter’s remembrance of Jesus’s words brings repentance as quickly as the interrogators had shouted their accusations. We know more clearly what happened because each event recorded in the Gospel narratives has its proper place in the puzzle. Lenski assembles the parts this way,

All the synoptists report the repentance of Peter with exceeding brevity and all of them mention his weeping. Matthew and Luke with aorist ἔκλαυσεν, which states the fact that he wept audibly, but Mark with the imperfect and thus descriptive ἔκλαιεν, which describes Peter as shedding tears. To this verb Matthew and Luke add the verb, πικρῶς, “*bitterly*,” referring to the bitter contrition from which the sobbing came.[[48]](#footnote-48)

According to Luke 22:61, it was at this point that the Lord turned and looked at Peter. The logical explanation is that Jesus had come down from the room where He had been informally examined, and was passing through the courtyard.[[49]](#footnote-49)

One must conclude that the four accounts of the third denial readily harmonize, and that Peter’s blatant failure perfectly fulfills Christ’s prophecy. While each Gospel account tells only part of the story, each of these parts is accurate and combines readily with the others to form a seamless and cohesive account of Peter’s desperate night. Each narrative accurately records facts which harmonize with the other Gospel records, and Christ’s prediction is exactly fulfilled.

**Conclusion**

The Scripture record of Peter’s denials is without error. As the previous discussion demonstrates, on each of the three occasions when Peter denied Jesus, multiple challengers repeatedly accused Peter of being a disciple of Christ. The grammar employed in Peter’s responses (ἠρνεῖτο, the imperfect of ἀρνήεομαι) allows one to understand that each of the denials may have been lengthy and repetitious. In these extended conversations some people spoke to Peter; others spoke about him.

Regarding the occasion of the first denial, the high priest is Caiaphas. The language of the text of John 18:13, “Caiaphas, who was high priest that year*,*” and John 18:19, “Then the high priest questioned Jesus,” indicates that Caiaphas was the high priest intended by John. This is in harmony with the synoptic Gospels. Therefore, the courtyard of Caiaphas is the location of the first episode of Peter’s denying Christ. John 18:24 is a belated explanation, indicating that this first examination occurred after Annas *had sent* Jesus to Caiaphas.

The specific location of Peter’s first confrontation is at a fire in the courtyard, while he was with the officers and slaves. By transposing the first two denials recorded in John’s Gospel, it is reasonable to understand that the absence of a description in John’s account concerning the location of this denial does not indicate an immediate interrogation at the gate. John does *not* give information which is in conflict with the other narratives.

Peter’s second denial occurs on the “*porch*” of Caiaphas’s palace. The same location is designated by the term “*gateway*.” Both words are references to the covered passage leading from the courtyard to the street. Matthew’s and Mark’s choices of terms do not falsify either narrative.

The use of πάλιν, “*again*,” and ἠρνεῖτο, “*he was denying*,” indicate Peter’s repeated answers. Therefore more than one person is interrogating Peter at this new location. The same maid who accused Peter at the fire is recorded by Mark as speaking “*once again*” to the bystanders. Matthew reports another servant girl’s involvement in the scene. This is most likely the servant girl who John says is the door keeper. The presence of a man in the group is included in Luke’s Gospel. A full account is acquired by reviewing all four narratives.

The final denial is not described as to location. One must logically place the occurrence within the palace of Caiaphas, for Luke records that, after the third denial, Peter “*went outside”* and wept. The interrogators at this time converge on Peter and begin their positive identifications simultaneously. Among the flurry of confidently spoken charges are: (1) the detection of Peter’s speech variation, and (2) the identification by an eye witness. Those involved are identified as “*another man*,” “*the bystanders*,” and “*a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off.*”

The sharpened accusations of this last episode elicit an intensified response from Peter, who curses and swears in disowning his Lord. Peter’s blatant failure fulfills Christ’s prophecy, and the rooster’s crowing marks the end of the ordeal. In this third denial episode, the Gospel accounts coalesce to offer a composite account of Peter’s grief. This composite coalescence is characteristic of all three denials, and the four Gospel accounts readily harmonize in that: (1) each of Peter’s denials involves accusations from several challengers; (2) each Gospel selects a few details to report instead of relating every aspect of every event; (3) the Gospels’ different reports complement each other and do not contradict; (4) there is no valid basis for the claim that the Gospel narratives contain error.

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1. Arthur Write, “The First Trial of Jesus,” *The Expository Times* 6 (October 1894 - September 1895): 524. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All biblical quotations taken from the NASV unless otherwise noted.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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