Capitol Commission™

Peter's Rejection of Jesus

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Shaun Lewis / PO Box 2351, Springfield, IL 62705 / Shaun.Lewis@capitolcom.org

***John 18:1-27.* Jesus prayed while the disciples slept. It was late at night, and they were at the garden, Gethsemane. Though the Lord knew all that would happen, none of His disciples suspected a thing. The night seemed so peaceful to them. Quite suddenly, their Lord would be arrested, put on trial, and executed. Each of them would flee in fear of the authorities, and Peter who had vowed to never turn away would do just that.**

Fifteen-hundred years of ups and downs eventually turned a small city-state in the war-hungry Assyrian Empire. For three centuries (911-605 B.C.), it expanded, dominated, and cruelly oppressed the Middle East with an insatiable thirst for violence.

When Assyria set its eyes upon Egypt, King Sennacherib pushed west with a vast army. Marching down the Mediterranean coast towards his prize, Jewish city after city fell until he stopped at Jerusalem. The year was 701 B.C., and before the city gates Sennacherib's messenger declared:

> Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah… Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem…? (2 Kings 18:33-35).

Though Hezekiah was king of Judah, Assyria had reduced his kingdom to a few square miles now under siege. Hope for survival hung by a thread, and yet, who was actually in control that day? It wasn't Assyria. The Lord spoke to Hezekiah saying, "I will defend this city to save it, for My own sake and for the sake of My servant David" (2 Kings 19:32). On the next morning, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers lay dead on the battlefield. God was in control that day (cf. Psa 20:7).

The point is that things aren't always as they seem. When Joseph was sold into slavery, it seemed his life was over. When Moses was cornered at the Red Sea, it seemed this was his end. When David fled from Saul, no one thought he would he become the greatest king in the history of Israel. Consider Elijah who challenged the king's prophets or Jonah who preached repentance in Nineveh, nothing was as it seemed on any of those days either.

We find the same theme when Judas led the authorities and a legion of soldiers to Gethsemane. On the night of Jesus' betrayal, it wasn't Judas, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, or any number of guards who controlled the night. It was Jesus.

Gethsemane

Between John 17 and 18, Jesus and His disciples left the home where they celebrated Passover. They walked through Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, and up to the garden, Gethsemane. Knowing what was at hand, Jesus prayed three agonizing times while His disciples slept (cf. Matt 26:36-46). After all He had said to them at dinner, they believed and were determined to stand with Him (cf. John 16:30). Peter was ready to give his life (cf. John 13:37), and after all Jesus' warnings of persecution, the others were no less devoted. In only a matter of hours their devotion would melt away. They would run from Christ being filled with doubt and fear. What happened?

Jesus told His men He would soon leave and that they should expect to be persecuted (cf. John 13:33, 15:18-16:4). They accepted it not knowing that "leaving" meant their Lord would be taken and crucified. They didn't expect a long night ahead until the third time Jesus nudged them awake. Their eyes opened to torches and weapons—Judas escorting a Roman cohort and leaders from the Sanhedrin. Could this *really* be part of His plan?

Judas left Jesus earlier in the night and sent word to the Sanhedrin who then requested armed assistance from Pilate. During the week of Passover, Jewish nationalism was always high, but this year the city had rushed out to wave palm branches hailing Jesus as messiah (cf. John 12:12-13). Since everyone expected something to happen, it's no surprise that Pilate wouldn't take a chance. He listened to the Sanhedrin and sent an entire cohort of 600 guards (cf. John 18:1-3). For the Jewish leaders, Gethsemane was their best shot at arresting Jesus, crushing a potential rebellion, and solidifying their power.

> "IF GOD IS THE AUTHOR OF THIS PASSION PLAY, JESUS IS THE PROTAGONIST—BUT ALSO THE PRODUCER AND DIRECTOR."[1]

The disciples were shocked. Jesus wasn't: "Knowing all that would happen to Him, [Jesus] came forward and said, 'Whom do you seek?'" (cf. John 18:4). It's striking that an unarmed man would walk out to address 600 soldiers. They didn't order Him to come—He went out to them, and they drew back in fear (cf. John 18:5-6). They wanted, "Jesus of Nazareth," to which He said: "I am." Those two words in the Greek are powerful. When Moses fell in fear at the burning bush, what did God say? "I am who I am" (cf. Ex 3:14). The voice that this Roman cohort heard in Gethsemane was the same voice Moses heard at Midian. Like him, these men fell in fear.

Bible Studies
Legislators: Thursdays at 7:30am, Governor's Office
Justices and Staff: Tuesdays at 7:30am, Supreme Court Building

Peter's Rejection of Jesus

As the crowd returned to its feet, Jesus asked again who they want. The same answer is given, and Judas worked up the courage to identify Christ with a kiss (cf. Matt 26:48-50). Before they take Him, Jesus makes an order: "If you seek Me, let these men go" (cf. John 18:8). Literally: "You will leave these men alone." It's a command. The One who ordered the wind and the waves, who had commanded demons and who had spoke life into the dead, ordered 600 soldiers to obey Him… and they did. All eleven disciples were present, and though Peter provoked the crowd with his sword, nothing happened (cf. Mark 14:51-52). Jesus was taken. His disciples went free.

With swords and the force of numbers, you would expect the Romans to take charge. John tells us they fell in fear of the Lord's voice, obeyed Him, and made their arrest only when it was clear He would let them.

PETER'S DENIAL OF CHRIST

Peter comes to the forefront more than any other disciple. Of all we know about Peter, no chapter in the Gospels focuses more on him than John 18. While walking with Jesus to Gethsemane, Peter's faith rode high. Yet, when he saw his Lord arrested, beaten, and put on trial, his faith shattered.

Peter fell, but we need to remember his love for Jesus. He was a devoted disciple who put his life on the line by striking Caiaphas' servant. Jesus condemned the action and healed the servant, but it does show Peter's devotion and loyalty (cf. John 18:10-11). He fully believed in Jesus and felt a certain duty to fight for Him. It seems Peter could accept his own death on behalf of Jesus, but not Jesus' death on behalf of him.

The idea of Messiah meant power, glory, splendor, and honor. The disciples knew Jesus would be leaving them (cf. John 13:33). Never did they think that leaving meant death at the hands of the Romans. As the night unfolded, Peter and the others saw things they never imagined. They fled Gethsemane with doubts while following the events of the night at a distance (cf. Matt 26:56). No one was ready to die for Jesus any longer. They weren't even sure who Jesus was anymore.

A series of quickly-executed trials follows the arrest and continues into the early morning. Though we read some of the exchanges, John drives our attention back to Peter (cf. John 18:13-27). Jesus went to Annas first, and an unknown disciple brought Peter close to hear the pretrial (cf. John 18:15-16). No one stopped this unknown disciple, but many questioned Peter. They recognized him. A servant girl cornered him, then a small crowd, and a relative of the high priest's servant. Peter had openly slashed with his sword in the midst of a Roman cohort, but here only hours later, he didn't want anyone to know that he even knew Jesus. Something changed in Peter.

It was very early morning when Jesus' pretrial with Annas ended. He was taken to Caiaphas. By this time, Peter had denied the Lord three times as foretold (cf. John 13:38), and he wept. He certainly didn't weep because his courage had failed (Peter was never short of courage). Peter chose to reject Jesus. Why? Because he was no longer certain that Jesus was the messiah. Three years of believing and abandoning all for a man he now wasn't so sure he trusted. Peter doubted, and in his despair, he wept bitterly (cf. Matt 26:29-75; John 18:17, 25-27).

It's an awful story, but John brings Peter's fall to the forefront, because the purpose of his Gospel is evangelistic (cf. John 20:31). All have sinned against God, deserve to be shut out from His presence forever, and sentenced to an eternity of suffering. Christ came to save sinners, and in Peter we see a man who sinned greatly. Will Jesus *still* save him? John shifts from Peter to detail Jesus' trials, execution, and resurrection in the coming chapters… but what about Peter?!

John's last chapter brings us back to him. Peter repents and turns back to Jesus. And what we find is that Jesus truly came to save sinners just like Peter (cf. John 21:15-19).

MANY MEETINGS

The night grows darker with Jesus enduring three religious trials and three civil trials. His pretrial with Annas took place around midnight or 1AM. His two trials before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin were around 2 and 5AM. Thereafter, Jesus was taken to Pilate who punted the case to Herod Antipas who gave it back to Pilate.

Six rushed trials to find an innocent man guilty. Jesus was executed around 9 or 10AM and died on a cross that afternoon.

We'll trace some of these trials in our next study.

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[1]Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 490.