

The Gospel of John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 23: Betrayal, Arrest, and Peter's Denial

John 18:1-27

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

John 18:1-27 brings us into the garden, the arrest, and Peter's denial. Doctrinally, the passage emphasizes Jesus' sovereign control even in His arrest (the soldiers fall back at His "I am he"), His willing acceptance of the cup the Father gives, His protection of His own, and His bold confession of truth before the authorities. Set against this is Peter's threefold denial, which teaches soberly that even sincere disciples can fall, while the larger story (and Peter's later restoration) points to hope for those who fail. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9.

At the same time, the passage is intensely formational through the contrast between Christ and Peter. It exposes how small steps of distance and compromise (following at a distance, warming at the enemies' fire) set the stage for denial, it warns against overconfidence in our own strength, and it models confessing the truth and bearing unjust treatment without retaliation. The teacher should let students see themselves in both Christ (whom they aspire to follow) and Peter (whose weakness they share), and find hope in the Christ who went willingly to save sinners like Peter.

So aim at both: a clear grasp of Christ's sovereign, willing self-sacrifice, the reality that disciples can fall, and the hope of restoration, and a heart that confesses Christ faithfully, guards against compromise, and relies on His strength. The disciple we are forming watches and prays, leans on Christ, and finds restoration when they fail.

Question 1

Student Question:

When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, He stepped forward, said "I am he," and they "drew back and fell to the ground" (vv. 4-6). What does this reveal about Jesus' authority and control even in the hour of His arrest?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

At the arrest, John shows Jesus in complete command. He steps forward and asks, "Whom do you seek?" When they answer, "Jesus of Nazareth," He says, "I am he," and "they drew back and fell to the ground" (vv. 4-6). The armed detachment collapses before an unarmed man's word.

Draw out the authority revealed. The phrase "I am he" (ego eimi) again echoes the divine name, and its effect, the soldiers falling back, displays the power that resides in Jesus even as He

submits to arrest. He is not overpowered; He could have walked away. He is sovereignly in control of the very events that will lead to His death.

Stress that the cross is His choice. John is careful throughout to show that Jesus is not a hapless victim swept up by circumstances. The same power that flattened the arresting party is laid aside so that He can be taken. He lays down His life of His own accord (10:18). His submission is voluntary, not forced.

Apply it to our confidence. The Savior who went to the cross was never out of control; He went willingly and sovereignly to accomplish our salvation. This assures us that the cross was God's plan, not a tragedy that derailed it. Ask students how seeing Jesus in command even at His arrest strengthens their confidence in His saving work and His sovereignty over their own circumstances.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus' sovereign authority even at His arrest (John 18:4-6).
- "I am he" echoing the divine name and displaying His power.
- The cross as Jesus' voluntary choice, not a defeat (John 10:18).
- Confidence that the cross was God's deliberate plan.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the soldiers' falling back reveal about Jesus' authority?
- How does it assure you that Jesus was in control even at His arrest?
- How does His sovereignty steady you in your own circumstances?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus said, "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" (v. 11). What is the "cup" Jesus speaks of, and what does His willingness to drink it teach us about facing the hard things the Father allows in our own lives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When Peter tries to fight, Jesus says, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" (v. 11). The "cup" is the suffering of the cross, including the bearing of sin and the wrath against it, which the Father had appointed for Him.

Define the cup. In the Old Testament, the cup often represents a portion appointed by God, frequently the cup of suffering or judgment (Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17). Jesus' cup was the suffering and death of the cross, in which He would bear our sins. It was a cup He shrank from in Gethsemane, yet resolved to drink in obedience to the Father.

Draw out His acceptance. Jesus receives the cup as from the Father's hand: "the cup that the Father has given me." He does not see His suffering as random or as merely the work of His enemies, but as the Father's appointed will, which He willingly embraces. His submission is to the Father, not to His captors.

Apply it to our hard things. Help students learn from Jesus how to face the hard things the Father allows. Like Jesus, we can receive even difficult, painful circumstances as in some sense from the Father's hand, to be accepted in trust and obedience rather than fought against or fled. This does not mean we seek suffering, but that we can drink the cup the Father gives. Ask students what "cup" they may need to accept from the Father's hand, and what trusting acceptance would look like.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cup as the appointed suffering of the cross (John 18:11; Psalm 75:8).
- Jesus receiving His suffering from the Father's hand.
- Submission to the Father's will rather than to circumstances.
- Accepting hard things from the Father's hand in trust and obedience.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the "cup" Jesus speaks of, and why does He drink it?
- What does His acceptance teach about facing hard things?
- What cup might the Father be asking you to accept from His hand?

Question 3

Student Question:

At His arrest Jesus said of His disciples, "If you seek me, let these men go," protecting them even as He was taken (vv. 8–9). What does it reveal about Christ that He guarded His own in the very moment of His own danger?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Even at His arrest, Jesus protects His disciples: "If you seek me, let these men go" (v. 8). John notes this fulfilled His word that He would lose none of those the Father gave Him (v. 9). In the moment of His own greatest danger, His concern is for His own.

Draw out the shepherd's heart. The Good Shepherd, about to lay down His life, shields His sheep. He steps between His disciples and the danger, ensuring their safety even as He is taken. His love for His own does not waver in His own crisis; if anything, it shines more brightly.

Connect it to His keeping of His people. Jesus' protection of the disciples here is a picture of His larger commitment to keep all whom the Father has given Him (compare 6:39; 10:28). He does not lose His own. The same Christ who shielded the eleven keeps His people still.

Apply it to the students' security and example. We are kept by a Christ whose care for His own held firm even at His arrest. And His example calls us to a love that thinks of others even in our own trouble. Ask students how it comforts them that Christ guards His own even in His own danger, and where they might, like Him, care for others even amid their own difficulties.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ protecting His own even in His own danger (John 18:8–9).
- The Good Shepherd shielding His sheep.
- Christ's commitment to lose none the Father gives Him (John 6:39; 10:28).
- Love that thinks of others even in our own trouble.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it reveal that Christ guarded His own at His arrest?
- How does His keeping of His people comfort you?
- Where might you care for others even in your own difficulty?

Question 4

Student Question:

Peter tried to defend Jesus with a sword, but Jesus stopped him (vv. 10–11). Where are you tempted to advance or defend Christ's cause by worldly means rather than His way, and what would His way look like instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up Peter's sword. Impulsive Peter draws a weapon and cuts off the ear of Malchus, but Jesus stops him: "Put your sword into its sheath" (vv. 10–11). Peter tried to advance Jesus' cause by force, and Jesus refused it.

Draw out the lesson about means. Peter's loyalty was real, but his method was wrong. Jesus' kingdom does not advance by the sword, by worldly power, coercion, or force (compare 18:36). Peter wanted to fight a spiritual battle with a physical weapon. Jesus would conquer not by killing but by dying.

Apply it to how we advance and defend Christ's cause. We can be tempted to use worldly means, manipulation, anger, political force, sharp words, dishonesty, to defend or advance the faith. But the kingdom that came through a cross does not advance by the world's weapons. Christ's way is truth, love, humility, suffering, and witness, not coercion.

Press for specifics. Ask each student where they are tempted to defend or advance Christ's cause by worldly means, in arguments, in conflict, in zeal that turns harsh, and what Christ's way would look like instead. The aim is to learn, with Peter, to sheathe the sword and trust the Lord's way of accomplishing His purposes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's kingdom not advancing by the sword or worldly force (John 18:11, 36).
- Misguided loyalty using the wrong means.
- The way of Christ: truth, love, humility, and suffering, not coercion.
- Trusting the Lord's way rather than the world's weapons.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to advance Christ's cause by worldly means?
- What would Christ's way look like instead?
- What "sword" might He be asking you to sheathe?

Question 5

Student Question:

Peter followed "at a distance" and stood "warming himself" at the fire of Jesus' enemies before he denied Him (vv. 15–18). How did the small steps of distance and compromise set the stage for Peter's denial?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question traces the path to Peter's denial. Before he denied Jesus, Peter "was following... at a distance" (compare the Synoptics) and stood "with them" warming himself at the charcoal fire of Jesus' enemies (vv. 18, 25). Small steps of distance and compromise preceded the fall.

Draw out the progression. Peter's denial did not come out of nowhere. It followed a series of smaller steps: following at a distance rather than close, positioning himself among the enemies of Jesus, getting comfortable at their fire. Each step moved him further from Christ and closer to the moment of denial. Big falls usually have small beginnings.

Apply the principle. Spiritual failure rarely happens in a single dramatic leap; it is usually the end of a path of small compromises, drifting, distancing, and placing ourselves in compromising company or situations. Warming ourselves at the wrong fires, growing comfortable where Christ is not honored, sets us up to deny Him when the question comes.

Press for honest reflection. Ask each student where they are following Christ at a distance or warming themselves at the wrong fires, the company, the environments, the small compromises that are moving them away from Him. Help them see how these small steps can set the stage for a larger fall, and to turn back before the rooster crows. Connect this to the next question on overconfidence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Small steps of distance and compromise preceding a fall (John 18:18, 25).
- Spiritual failure usually the end of a path, not a sudden leap.
- The danger of growing comfortable where Christ is not honored.
- Turning back from small compromises before they lead to denial.

Discussion Prompts

- How did distance and compromise set the stage for Peter's denial?
- Where are you following Christ at a distance?
- What "wrong fires" are you warming yourself at?

Question 6

Student Question:

Peter, who had vowed to lay down his life for Jesus, denied Him three times (vv. 17, 25–27). Where have you been overconfident in your own strength, and how does Peter's fall warn and humble you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up Peter's overconfidence. Peter had vowed, "I will lay down my life for you" (13:37), yet here he denies even knowing Jesus three times (vv. 17, 25–27). His confidence in his own strength proved hollow under pressure.

Draw out the lesson. Peter genuinely loved Jesus and genuinely meant his vow. His problem was not insincerity but overconfidence, trusting in his own resolve and courage rather than depending on Christ. "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). The self-assured are often the most vulnerable.

Apply it humbly. We are all more like Peter than we want to admit. Confidence in our own strength, "I would never do that," "my faith is strong enough", sets us up for a fall. The path of safety is humble dependence on Christ, watching and praying, knowing our weakness and leaning on His strength (Matthew 26:41).

Press for honest self-examination. Ask each student where they have been overconfident in their own strength, in resisting a particular temptation, in their faithfulness, in their maturity, and how Peter's fall warns and humbles them. The aim is not despair but humble dependence: to stop trusting our own resolve and to lean on Christ, who alone can keep us from falling.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Overconfidence in our own strength as a path to falling (John 18:17; 1 Corinthians 10:12).
- Sincere love undermined by self-reliance rather than dependence.
- Watching and praying as the path of safety (Matthew 26:41).
- Humble dependence on Christ rather than our own resolve.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you been overconfident in your own strength?
- How does Peter's fall warn and humble you?
- What would humble dependence on Christ look like for you?

Question 7

Student Question:

While Peter was denying Him outside, Jesus was inside answering the high priest with the truth: "I have spoken openly to the world... I have said nothing in secret" (vv. 19–21). What does Jesus' bold honesty before the authorities teach us about confessing the truth under pressure?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

While Peter denies outside, Jesus stands inside answering the high priest with bold honesty: "I have spoken openly to the world... I have said nothing in secret" (vv. 20–21). Under interrogation, with His life at stake, Jesus confesses the truth plainly.

Draw out the contrast with Peter, which John surely intends. Inside, the Master boldly confesses; outside, the disciple denies. The same pressure produces opposite responses. Jesus models faithful confession of the truth even when it is costly, even when it leads to the cross.

Stress the courage and integrity. Jesus does not trim His words to save Himself. He has nothing to hide; His teaching was public and consistent. He answers with truth, knowing it will be used against Him. This is the courage of integrity, the willingness to stand by the truth under pressure.

Apply it. Help students learn from Jesus how to confess the truth under pressure, in settings where honesty about Christ or about what is right is costly. The temptation, like Peter's, is to deny, deflect, or stay silent to protect ourselves. Jesus shows the better way: calm, honest confession of the truth, trusting God with the consequences. Ask students where they face pressure to compromise the truth and how Jesus' example guides them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus' bold confession of truth under pressure (John 18:20–21).
- The contrast between the Master's confession and the disciple's denial.
- The courage of integrity, standing by the truth at cost.
- Confessing the truth and trusting God with the consequences.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Jesus' bold honesty teach about confessing the truth?
- Where do you face pressure to compromise the truth?

- How does Jesus' example guide you there?

Question 8

Student Question:

When struck unjustly by an officer, Jesus did not retaliate but answered with calm truth (vv. 22–23). How do you respond to unjust treatment, and what would it look like to follow Jesus' example?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When an officer strikes Jesus for His answer, Jesus does not retaliate but responds with calm truth: "If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?" (vv. 22–23). He neither lashes out nor cowers; He answers with dignity and truth.

Draw out the example. Jesus, struck unjustly, does not return evil for evil. He does not insult or threaten in return (compare 1 Peter 2:23). Yet neither is He a doormat; He calmly challenges the injustice with truth. His response is neither retaliation nor servile silence, but truthful dignity.

Apply it to unjust treatment. We all face moments of unfair treatment, criticism, insult, or wrong. Our instinct is to retaliate, to defend ourselves aggressively, to return the blow. Jesus models a different way: not retaliating, not nursing revenge, yet able to speak the truth with calm dignity, entrusting Himself to God who judges justly.

Press for application. Ask each student how they typically respond to unjust treatment, and what it would look like to follow Jesus' example. The aim is to learn the Christlike response to being wronged: refusing retaliation, speaking truth with dignity, and entrusting ourselves to the Father. Ask where they currently face unjust treatment and how Jesus' example shapes their response.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus not retaliating when struck unjustly (John 18:22–23; 1 Peter 2:23).
- A response that is neither retaliation nor servile silence.
- Speaking truth with calm dignity under injustice.
- Entrusting ourselves to God who judges justly.

Discussion Prompts

- How do you typically respond to unjust treatment?
- What would following Jesus' example look like?
- Where do you face injustice now, and how does His example guide you?

Question 9

Student Question:

This chapter places Jesus' faithful confession beside Peter's denial, yet the larger story shows that Jesus went willingly to suffer for sinners like Peter, who would be restored. What does this passage teach about Christ's sovereign, willing self-sacrifice, about the reality that even sincere disciples can fall, and about the hope of restoration for those who fail Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it draws together the chapter's contrast and points beyond it to hope. The passage sets Jesus' faithful, sovereign self-giving beside Peter's failure, and the larger story shows that Jesus went willingly to suffer precisely for sinners like Peter, who would be restored.

First, draw out Christ's sovereign, willing self-sacrifice. Everything in the chapter shows that Jesus is in control and goes to the cross by choice: He steps forward to be arrested, the soldiers fall back at His word, He accepts the cup from the Father, He protects His own, and He confesses the truth boldly. The cross is not a defeat inflicted on a victim; it is the deliberate, willing self-offering of the sovereign Son for our salvation. This guards us against ever seeing the cross as a tragedy or accident.

Second, take seriously the reality that even sincere disciples can fall. Peter was no hypocrite; he loved Jesus and meant his vow to die for Him. Yet he denied his Lord three times. This is a sober warning to every disciple: sincerity and past faithfulness do not make us immune to failure. We must watch and pray and depend on Christ. This is consistent with Scripture's repeated warnings that believers can fall (1 Corinthians 10:12; Hebrews 3:12), and it cuts against any presumption that a true disciple could never seriously fail.

Third, and crucially, hold out the hope of restoration. Peter's denial is devastating, but it is not the end of his story. Jesus had already prayed for him, "that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32). Peter would weep bitterly, but he would be restored by the risen Christ (which we will see in Lesson 26) and become a pillar of the church. The same Jesus who went willingly to the cross went there for failing sinners like Peter, and like us. There is real hope for those who fall, if they turn again to Christ.

Bring it to honest, hopeful reflection. Help students hold all three truths together: Christ's willing sacrifice for sinners, the sober reality that we can fall, and the genuine hope of restoration. This guards against both presumption ("I could never deny Him") and despair ("I have failed too badly to be restored"). The chapter's two figures, the faithful Christ and the failing Peter, together preach the gospel: Christ gave Himself for sinners who fail, and He restores those who turn back to Him. Ask students how this both humbles them and gives them hope when they have failed their Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's sovereign, willing self-sacrifice for sinners (John 18:4–11).
- The cross as deliberate self-offering, not tragedy or defeat.
- The sober reality that even sincere disciples can fall (1 Corinthians 10:12; Hebrews 3:12).
- The hope of restoration for those who turn again (Luke 22:32).
- A guard against both presumption and despair.
- The gospel preached by the contrast: Christ gave Himself for failing sinners and restores them.

Discussion Prompts

- What does this passage teach about Christ's willing self-sacrifice?
- What does Peter's fall teach about even sincere disciples?
- What hope does the passage hold out for those who fail their Lord?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this chapter, the calm courage of Christ and the fall of Peter. What is one specific way Jesus is forming you to confess Him faithfully and to rely on His strength rather than your own?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the chapter's contrast into a personal aim: to confess Christ faithfully and to rely on His strength rather than our own. Both Christ's example and Peter's failure shape this formation.

Help students learn from both figures. From Christ they learn faithful confession, sovereign trust, and willing obedience. From Peter they learn the danger of self-reliance and the path of small compromises. The disciple this chapter forms aspires to Christ's faithfulness while soberly aware of Peter's weakness in themselves.

Make it concrete. Ask each student to name one specific way Jesus is forming them to confess Him faithfully (a setting where they tend to stay silent or deny Him) and one way they will rely on His strength rather than their own (watching, praying, dependence in a place of known weakness).

Close with hope. The chapter ends with Peter's failure and a crowing rooster, but the gospel does not end there, and neither does Peter's story. Let students leave both sobered by their own capacity to fail and encouraged that the Christ who went willingly to the cross went there for failing disciples like Peter and like them, and that He restores those who turn back to Him. The call is to confess Him faithfully, lean on His strength, and, when we fail, to turn again.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Learning faithfulness from Christ and humility from Peter.
- Confessing Christ while soberly aware of our weakness.
- Reliance on Christ's strength rather than our own.
- Concrete formation and the hope of restoration.

Discussion Prompts

- How is Jesus forming you to confess Him faithfully?
- Where do you most need to rely on His strength rather than your own?
- How does the hope of restoration encourage you when you fail?