

The Gospel of John

Lesson 23: Betrayal, Arrest, and Peter's Denial -- John 18:1-27

The prayer is over, and now Jesus walks across the Kidron Valley into a garden, with the cross now only hours away. Judas knows the place, because Jesus often met there with His disciples, and the betrayer leads a detachment of soldiers and officials, armed and carrying torches in the dark, to arrest one unarmed man. And here, at the very moment of His arrest, John shows us that Jesus is not a victim being overtaken by events. He steps forward and asks, "Whom do you seek?" When they say, "Jesus of Nazareth," He answers, "I am he," and the words carry such weight that the whole armed band draws back and falls to the ground. Even in His arrest, the great "I am" is in command.

Jesus goes to the cross by choice, and He goes protecting His own. "If you seek me, let these men go," He says of His disciples, and John notes that this fulfilled His promise that He would lose none of them. Peter, ever impulsive, draws a sword and slices off the ear of the high priest's servant, but Jesus stops him: "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" He will not be defended by violence. He has set His face to drink the cup of suffering the Father has placed in His hands, and nothing, not betrayal, not arrest, not even the misguided loyalty of His friends, will turn Him from it.

And then, woven through the account of Jesus' calm courage, comes one of the saddest stories in the Gospel. Peter, who swore he would lay down his life for Jesus, follows at a distance into the courtyard of the high priest. He stands warming himself at a charcoal fire among the enemies of Jesus, and three times he is asked if he is one of Jesus' disciples, and three times he says no. "I am not." The contrast is devastating. Inside, Jesus is boldly confessing the truth before the authorities. Outside, in the firelight, Peter is denying he even knows Him. And at once a rooster crows, just as Jesus said it would.

This chapter holds up two responses to pressure side by side. There is Jesus, who knows exactly what is coming and walks straight into it, confessing the truth, drinking the cup, protecting His own. And there is Peter, brave in word and broken in the moment, who discovers that his courage cannot carry him as far as his love wanted to go. We see ourselves in both. We want to be faithful like Christ, and we know the cold sweat of Peter in the courtyard. Read this chapter and watch the sovereign self-giving of Jesus, and let Peter's fall search your own heart about where, and how, you are tempted to deny your Lord.

Group Discussion: Inside, Jesus boldly confessed the truth before the authorities, while outside, Peter denied even knowing Him three times (vv. 17-27). What pressures lead us, like Peter, to quietly deny Christ, and why is the failure often a matter of small moments rather than dramatic ones?

Personal Reflection: Peter denied Jesus while “warming himself” at the enemies’ fire (vv. 18, 25), having followed only “at a distance.” Where in your life are you following Christ at a distance or warming yourself at the wrong fires, and what might that be setting you up for?

Read John 18:1–27

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 53:7, the servant who did not open His mouth before His oppressors; Luke 22:31–32, Jesus praying that Peter’s faith would not fail and that he would turn again; 1 Corinthians 10:12, taking heed lest we fall; Matthew 26:41, watching and praying so as not to enter temptation; 1 Peter 5:8–9, the adversary prowling and the call to resist him firm in faith.