

Chapter 37: The Betrayal of Jesus

John 18:1–27

It's time. No more signs. No more teaching. No more intercessory prayer. There is nothing left for Jesus to do but to give himself up to his betrayer. On his way to the cross, he will be tried, beaten, denied, mocked, and spit upon. For this reason, it is probably best to understand that Jesus' work "at the cross" begins here, when he goes out to meet Judas in the garden of Gethsemane. All this marks the absolute lowest point in his estate of humiliation. Nevertheless, it is also here that we see the glory of Jesus shine most brightly in the Gospel of John. Throughout this Gospel, John has been teaching us that his most glorious moments were not when he gathered to himself the largest crowds, but when he is most exquisitely despised and rejected by his own people. By now, John has prepared us to see the character, love, resolve, strength, mercy, and power of Jesus shine in the middle of his darkest hour. In John 18:1–27, we will start to see Jesus' glory in its full radiance, for *Jesus most fully reveals his true identity at the cross.*

Jesus Revealed in a Confrontation (John 18:1–11)

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John does not tell us of Jesus' agonized prayers in Gethsemane.¹ In some ways this is not a surprise, since John has also omitted from his own Gospel other details that are critical to the Synoptic Gospels, including both Jesus' baptism and the institution of the Lord's Supper. Here, as in the other cases, there are a few reasons for these differences between Matthew, Mark, and Luke (on one side) and John (on the other side). First, John does not feel compelled to retell what the other Gospels have recorded so well already. In fact, as we will see when we study the crucifixion narrative, John writes in a way that expects his readers to be familiar with the accounts of the Synoptic Gospels, especially in the way that John connects the death of Jesus explicitly back with Jesus' birth. John does not tell us the story of the birth of Jesus, but only Matthew and Luke, and John expects us to know those stories in order for us to make sense of his narrative of Jesus' crucifixion. Furthermore, since John was an eye-witness to the events as one of Jesus' disciples, John provides us with other details that are not found in the Synoptic Gospels. Finally, John has a very specific theological purpose for his Gospel. The glory of Jesus is so multifaceted that each Gospel writer is able to cast a spotlight on a different aspect of Jesus' glory.

So, where the Synoptic Gospels tell of Jesus' prayers in Gethsemane as a transition between the Upper Room and the betrayal of Judas, John has already recorded for us the prayers of Jesus that we need from this Gospel (John 17). John has not ignored the agony and apprehension of Jesus as he approaches the cross (John 12:27; 13:21), but John is uniquely capturing the power and glory of Jesus in his willing self-sacrifice. Therefore, John writes, "When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered" (John 18:1). John alone tells us that Jesus crosses the brook Kidron, and John alone tells us

that Gethsemane is a *garden*. Both of these details are important to John's narrative.

The Brook Kidron

William Hendriksen gives us both the *geographical* and *theological* background for understanding the significance of the brook Kidron:

Proceeding in an easterly direction, they went *out of the city* (which is probably meant here in 18:1) across the winter-brook Kedron. The valley of the Kedron is located between Jerusalem's eastern wall and the Mount of Olives. During the hot season the channel is dry. Only during the winter—and even then only after a heavy shower—does anything resembling a “brook” actually appear. Hence, it is called (literally) a “winter flow-er” (a stream which flows during the winter-season). The name *Kedron* itself (according to what is probably the best reading) means dark, turbid.²

More importantly, this brook was the sight of several important theological events in the history of God's people. First, the brook Kidron is where godly kings of Judah went to burn abominable, idolatrous images, vessels, and unclean things in order to purify the temple and restore right worship for God's people (1 Kgs. 15:13; 2 Kgs. 23:4; 2 Chron. 29:16; 30:14). Second, King David crossed the brook Kidron as he fled Jerusalem to escape the persecution of his son Absalom (2 Sam. 15:23): “Was he not, in this act of humiliation and suffering, a type of Christ?”³ Again, only John tells us that Jesus crossed the Brook Kidron on his way to the cross, and the twofold significance of what has happened here in Israel's history tells us that Jesus is about to endure suffering and humiliation for the sake of restoring right worship for his Father (cf. John 4:23).

A Garden

While John does not identify the place Jesus enters as Gethsemane (cf. Matt. 26:36; Mark 14:32), only John tells us that this place is a *garden*.⁴ It was in a garden that the first Adam shrunk from his God-ordained commission to *keep* (Gen. 2:15) God's creation according to the good order that God had created. This mandate meant many things for Adam, but first and foremost it required that Adam should obey the commandment that God had given him not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). Now, the *last* Adam has come to succeed where the *first* Adam failed (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45).⁵ Like the first Adam, Jesus stands in a garden with his own God-ordained commission to *keep*. This time, Jesus is not trying to keep God's creation from spiraling into sin and death. Instead, the Father has sent his Son into the world to redeem and restore what was lost at the fall. Therefore, the commission of last Adam to endure the full weight of God's wrath against the sin of humankind is far more difficult to accomplish than the commission of the first Adam to avoid eating fruit from one tree. Telling us that this scene takes place in a garden should be a trigger for us to heighten the dramatic tension. If the first Adam failed at an easy task, how will the last Adam fail at a humanly *impossible* task?

The Betrayal of Jesus

In the Gospel of John, the role of Judas in Jesus' betrayal is fairly limited:

[2] Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples. [3] So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. [4] Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” (John 18:2–4)

John does not include the kiss of Judas (Matt. 26:48–49; Mark 14:43–45; Luke 22:47–48) or the greeting of Judas, “Greetings, Rabbi!” (Matt. 26:49; cf. Mark 14:45). Furthermore, it is *Jesus*, not Judas, who initiates the conversation, asking, “Whom do you seek?” (John 18:4). Even the fact that Jesus went to the place where Jesus frequently met with his disciples, so that Judas would know where to find him, underscores the fact that Jesus is willingly offering himself up to die.⁶ As through the rest of the Gospel of John, Judas’s power is strictly limited by the true power of his Master who knows about his betrayer from the beginning. The Synoptic Gospels bring out Judas’s treachery, but the Gospel of John brings out Jesus’ control over his own betrayal. Jesus was not killed because Judas betrayed him; Judas betrayed Jesus because Jesus laid down his life of his own accord, with authority to lay it down, and authority to take it up again (John 10:18).

Matthew and Mark tell us that these “weapons” included “swords and clubs” (Matt. 26:47; Mark 14:43). Only John, however, tells us that this mob brought “lanterns and torches” with them. In part, this detail reminds us it was night when Judas departed to betray Jesus (John 13:30), and that it is night still. More than just defining the times when these things happened, the Gospel of John repeatedly uses light and darkness to reveal spiritual realities. So, Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night” (John 3:2) while he was still spiritually blind and incapable of understanding Jesus’ teaching. Jesus then warned Nicodemus, “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (John 3:19). Indeed, Jesus is the true light who has come into the world (John 1:4–5, 9), the “light of the world” (John 8:12).⁷ The fact that these men bring lanterns and torches symbolizes the fact that they continue to walk in darkness, rejecting the light of life that Jesus offers, for their works are evil.

“Whom Do You Seek?”

As mentioned earlier, it is Jesus, not Judas, who initiates the conversation:

[4] Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” [5] They answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. [6] When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground. [7] So he asked them again, “Whom do you seek?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” (John 18:4–7)

The first thing we should notice from this passage is that John tells us once again that Jesus possesses supernatural knowledge not only of his own fate, but about the intentions and plans of others (John 18:4; cf. John 2:24–25; 6:64; 13:1, 11). Second, we should recognize that the question, “Whom do you seek?” (John 18:4, 7) is identical to the question that Jesus will ask Mary Magdalene after his resurrection (John 20:15). With these two points in mind, we should recognize that Jesus is not asking for information from a place of ignorance. He knows who they are, whom they are seeking,

and what they intend to do with him once they capture him.

Rather than asking *them* to reveal information to *him*, Jesus wants to reveal *himself* to *them*. When they tell Jesus that they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus responds with the words “I am” (*egō eimi*). The ESV’s translation, “I am he” is accurate insofar as this phrase can be used in such a way as to identify oneself: “I am [the one you are seeking].”⁸ Nevertheless, it is better to translate this phrase literally as “I am” for two reasons.⁹ First, this phrase more clearly connects Jesus’ self-surrender with his self-revelation through the seven “I am” statements in the Gospel of John. When Jesus says, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35, 48, 51), “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5), “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7, 9), “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11, 14), “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and “I am the true vine” (John 15:1), he begins every phrase with *egō eimi*. Second, it was by the name “I am” that Yahweh revealed himself to his people through Moses (Ex. 3:14), and, as Jesus prepares for his own *exodus* (Luke 9:31) for the redemption of his people, Jesus identifies himself as the same Yahweh who led Israel out of Egypt. In the midst of this confrontation, Jesus does not run or fight. Instead, he patiently reveals the fullness of his identity as the Son of the Living God.

The overall effect of Jesus’ self-revelation is so overwhelming that Jesus’ enemies draw back and fall to the ground (John 18:6). Again, this detail demonstrates the great power of Jesus that he voluntarily lays aside in order to go to the cross: “There was no want [*i.e.*, lack] of power in him, therefore, to restrain their hands, if he had thought proper; but he wished to obey his Father, by whose decree he knew that he was called to die.”¹⁰ Merely by identifying himself, Jesus caused his enemies to fall to the ground. This is a clear foreshadowing of the greater reverence that Jesus’ enemies must one day give to him when his identity is fully revealed in glory: “...so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil. 2:10). If the power of Jesus’ self-identification caused his enemies to fall to the ground during his estate of humiliation, when his glory was veiled, then what will Jesus’ enemies do when he is revealed to them in the fullness of his estate of exaltation?

Nevertheless, Jesus’ enemies persist in their wicked rebellion against the Son of God. When Jesus asks them again, “Whom do you seek?”, they respond in the same way, asking again for Jesus of Nazareth (John 18:7). Calvin seems to shudder as he describes the obstinacy of the wicked against God’s truth: “They feel his power, indeed, but not so as to be disposed to obey; for sooner will they be broken a hundred times than they will yield. In short, their malice is a veil to hinder them from observing the light of God; their obstinacy renders them harder than stones, so that they never suffer themselves to be subdued.”¹¹

The Good Shepherd Laying Down His Life

While the question, “Whom do you seek?”, struck terror into the hearts of Jesus’ enemies, this was also the question that will later bring joy and comfort to Mary Magdalene after Jesus’ resurrection. When Jesus reveals his identity to Mary Magdalene, she does not fall back in fear like the enemies of Jesus, but she draws so near to him in joy and love that Jesus must tell her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father” (John 20:17). In the same way, these events could have been for the comfort of the disciples, if they had realized that they were witnessing Jesus willingly demonstrating, yet subduing, his power in order to complete the commission of his Father by going to the cross.¹² Nevertheless, they cannot understand why Jesus does not defend himself, and,

when Jesus refuses to defend himself, the disciples take it into their own hands: “[8] Jesus answered, ‘I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go.’ [9] This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: ‘Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one’” (John 18:8–9). Jesus responds again, chiding them gently by saying that he has already told them that he is the one they are looking for. This is an opportunity for the soldiers and guards to repent in the recognition that his mere self-revelation knocked them flat on their backs, but they do not.

Because Jesus knows that his enemies will not leave without taking him, he instead “discharges the office of a good Shepherd in protecting his flock. He sees the attack of the wolves, and does not wait till they come to the sheep which have been committed to his care, but immediately goes forward to guard them.”¹³ It is worth noting that “the formula ‘this was to fulfill the word,’ which elsewhere always refers to fulfillment of Scripture, here refers to Jesus’ own words, which suggests that Jesus’ words are thus being afforded no less authority than the Old Testament Scriptures.”¹⁴ In this case, it is difficult to know what “lost” might mean, so most commentators explain simply that “had the disciples at this time been captured by these soldiers and temple-guards, it would have been too severe a test for their faith. They were not ready for this extreme ordeal, this torture. Jesus knew this. Hence, he sees to it that they are not arrested.”¹⁵ On a broader level, this act of securing the disciples’ physical safety serves as an illustration of—and even the first step toward—the way in which Jesus the Good Shepherd will secure his disciples’ eternal security by laying down his life for his sheep.¹⁶ Even though the guards have come to hurt him, Jesus’ concern is for the safety of his own people.

Drinking the Father’s Cup

Peter cannot accept what his Master is doing: “[10] Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.) [11] So Jesus said to Peter, ‘Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?’” (John 18:10–11). In telling Peter to put his sword back into its sheath, Jesus gives a strongly worded rebuke to Peter.¹⁷ Of this “cup,” Leon Morris writes:

This is the only passage which assigns the origin of the “cup” to the Father. In the Old Testament “cup” often has associations of suffering and of the wrath of God (Ps. 7:8; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15; Ezek. 23:31–33, etc.; cf. Rev. 14:10; 16:19). We cannot doubt but that in this solemn moment these are the thoughts that the term arouses.¹⁸

Jesus knows that he must drink the full draught of the cup of his Father’s wrath through his suffering at the cross. Once again, however, it is Peter who stands in his Master’s way. Earlier, when Jesus confided in his disciples about the suffering that he must eventually face, Peter had taken his Master aside to rebuke Jesus, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (Matt. 16:22). Now, when the time for Jesus’ suffering actually comes, Peter essentially says the same thing with his sword, and Jesus again reminds him, in essence, that “you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matt. 16:23). We will read more about Peter’s actions as the story continues.

For Jesus, the cup that his Father gave him to drink is at the center of his identity. He can no more depart from his Father’s will than cease to be himself, for Jesus Christ is the same yesterday,

today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). Although this ordeal will cost him everything, Jesus reveals his love for his Father, his compassion for his people, and his strength to finish the mission in the way that he insists on drinking his Father's cup.

Jesus Revealed by a Contrast (John 18:12–18)

As though the Word of God could be bound (2 Tim. 2:9), the soldiers and the officers of the Jews arrest Jesus and bind him (John 18:12). Jesus has already demonstrated his power even when he spoke two words to identify himself. In a few days, even the cords of death will not be able to hold Jesus down in the grave (cf. Ps. 18:4–5); how much less will these cords be able to hold Jesus if he intends to remove himself from them? John's account of the crucifixion of Jesus continues to display the huge gap between the restrained power of Jesus and the weak methods that his enemies use in their arrogant belief that they have overpowered him of their own strength: "So far as it was useful, therefore, he asserted his power against his enemies; but when it was necessary to obey the Father, he restrained himself, that he might be offered as a sacrifice. But let us remember that the body of the Son of God was bound, that our souls might be loosed from the cords of sin and of Satan."¹⁹

Former High Priest Annas

First, the mob crowd leads Jesus to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who is high priest that year (John 18:13). Caiaphas, John reminds us, is the man "who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people" (John 18:14; cf. John 11:50). Although the law of Moses taught that the office of high priest was for a lifetime (Num. 35:25, 28), part of the way that the Roman empire exercised their authority over the nation of Israel was by controlling the office of high priest. So, Annas had been appointed as high priest by Quirinius in 6 A.D., but then deposed by Valerius Gratus around 15 A.D., so that at this point, Caiaphas is the current high priest.²⁰ The fact that Annas was deposed by the Romans, however, does not mean that he had lost any of his political clout among the Jews, especially since it was Annas's sons and sons-in-law who took up the office of high priest after him:

Thus, during the entire period of Christ's ministry and for a long time afterward, Annas was the man who was responsible, to a large extent, for the actions of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Someone else might be the presiding officer of the Sanhedrin, Annas was the man to consult. One can imagine how, whenever a priest would come up with a plan or idea, and would broach it, another would immediately reply, "Have you cleared this with Annas?"²¹

In America, we see the same kind of thing with former presidents. After presidents leave office, they gain a new kind of power, authority, and influence in their political parties and in the wider country. Certainly, this authority is less than they had when they exercised the powers granted to them under the United States Constitution, but it is significant nonetheless.²² Additionally, we continue to refer to former presidents as "President Obama" or "President Bush," even though they are no longer in office. That explains why we read in John 18:19 that "the high priest" questioned Jesus, but then that after the interrogation "Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest" (John 18:24). In fact, it is (former) High Priest Annas who interrogates Jesus in John 18:19–23 and then sends Jesus bound

over to Caiaphas, who passes Jesus over to Pilate (cf. Luke 3:2; Acts 4:6).²³

The First Denial

At this point in the narrative, John cuts away from Jesus for a moment to turn our attention back on two of the disciples who followed Jesus, one of whom being Simon Peter:

[15] Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, [16] but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in. [17] The servant girl at the door said to Peter, “You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” [18] Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself. (John 18:15–18)

John only identifies Simon Peter, but not the other disciple who was known to the high priest. Most people speculate, then, that this other disciple is John himself, which seems likely. John also did not identify the second disciple who followed after Jesus with Andrew (John 1:35–40), and John frequently speaks of the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (cf. John 13:23; 20:2; 21:20). Only at the very end does John reveal that he himself is the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (John 21:20, 24), but he never explicitly connects himself with the unnamed disciple from John 1 or the unnamed disciple here. Nevertheless, John frequently identifies the *other* disciples by name (John 1:40, 43; 6:7, 8, 68; 12:21, 22; 13:6, 24, 26, 36; 14:5, 8), only refusing to name himself, so there are very strong reasons to believe that this disciple who lets Peter in the courtyard is indeed John.

But why did they follow after Jesus, especially since he took care to protect them in the garden of Gethsemane? John Calvin answers this question wisely:

There is no reason to doubt that godly zeal was the motive that induced both of them to follow Christ; but since Christ had plainly declared that he spared Peter and the others, he who was so weak would have found it to be far better for him to groan and pray in some dark corner than to go into the presence of men. He now undertakes, with great earnestness, the performance of a duty from which Christ had released him; and when he comes to the confession of faith, in which he ought to have persevered even to death, his courage fails. We ought always to consider what the Lord requires from us, that those who are weak may not undertake what is not necessary.²⁴

Quite simply, Jesus both knew that Peter would not be able to handle the pressures of this moment, and he told Peter so. But where Jesus told Peter to flee from temptation, Peter ignored his Master's actual instructions out of an overwhelming desire to do whatever he could for his Master. This is a complicated situation, and we will never find anything that corresponds exactly to Peter's position in our time. Nevertheless, the basic issue that Calvin points out is valuable: When we feel the sense that we should do something, is that because it is actually something that God has given us to do, or because of some other reason? No matter how great we perceive the need to be, we dare not take up

for ourselves something that God has revealed to be too much for us to handle (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:33; 1 Tim. 3:6; 2 Tim. 2:22–23).

Now, we need to remember that Peter is now entering into the courtyard of the high priest, and only minutes earlier Peter had cut off the right ear of the high priest's *servant* (John 18:10).²⁵ Certainly, Peter must be experiencing a general sense of anxiety and dread over what is happening to Jesus, but he is also on his guard for what might happen to *him* if people discover his identity. But then, a slave girl asks an innocent question. The grammar of the question suggests that the girl expects Peter's answer to be *no*: "You aren't one of the disciples of this man, too, are you?"²⁶ In Peter's hyper-vigilance, he goes along with the expectation of her question and says, "I am not" (*ouk eimi*), a phrase that sharply contrasts with Jesus' "I am" (*egō eimi*). Jesus voluntarily surrenders himself, but Peter refuses even to acknowledge his connection with his Lord.

In this contrast, we recognize just how much pressure, fear, and pain filled this circumstance. Although Jesus remains calm and steady-minded throughout these proceedings, Peter's collapse illustrates what any *merely* human being would do under the circumstances. By this extraordinary contrast with Peter's failure, Jesus' glory shines even brighter. Peter's story is not over, but John leaves the tension unresolved to cut back to the proceedings surrounding Jesus. For now, we leave Peter warming himself by the fire in the courtyard, in close proximity with other people who keep looking at his face in the glow of the fire, asking themselves, "Isn't that the man who...?" We'll get back to that part of the story in a moment.

Jesus Revealed through Countercharges (John 18:19–27)

As we discussed earlier, the "high priest" who questions Jesus is not the current high priest Caiaphas, but Annas, a former high priest and the father-in-law of Caiaphas (John 18:13):

[19] The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. [20] Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. [21] Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said." (John 18:19–21)

When John tells us that the high priests questions Jesus "about his disciples and his teaching," this means that Annas is asking Jesus about what Jesus taught his disciples privately, out of the hearing of the public. Jesus' response about how he spoke openly to the world makes this clear: "He did not maintain one message for public consumption and another, more dangerous one for a secret group of initiates."²⁷ Clearly, the religious leaders believe that Jesus has some kind of secret plot to seize power for himself at their expense—after all, that's what they have been doing to him!

Here again, we see the glorious power of Jesus in his restraint. With his powerful word, he could knock over these people too, but instead he calmly stands by his public teaching ministry. Jesus knows that his kingdom does not depend on his being accepted by powerful men, so he does not attempt to defend himself before them. He does not even seize the opportunity to clarify his teaching in the hope of smoothing over misunderstandings. In the same circumstances, almost any public speaker would prefer to speak for himself rather than submitting himself to judgment according to

what “those who have heard me” might have heard. Jesus recognizes, though, that this is a sham trial and that this is an essential step in the commission that his Father gave him to suffer and die.

The First Strike

Although Jesus himself rebuked his own followers when they used violence against Jesus’ enemies (John 18:11), Jesus’s enemies do not exercise similar restraint against Jesus:

[22] When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” [23] Jesus answered him, “If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?” [24] Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. (John 18:22–24)

One of the officers of the temple standing nearby delivers the first strike against Jesus, hitting him with his hand and demanding, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” (John 18:22). Later, after the Jews eventually transfer jurisdiction over Jesus to Pilate in order to seek permission to execute Jesus, Roman soldiers will also strike Jesus with their hands (John 19:3).²⁸ Representatives from the whole world, including both Jews and Gentiles, beat upon their Creator and Lord with their bare hands, and Jesus willingly endures their blows.

Once again, Jesus’ restraint is extraordinary, especially compared with his sharp command to Peter back in the garden (John 18:11). Here, Jesus does not tell the officer not to strike him, but he only asks why the officer struck him if he has spoken rightly. First, though, Jesus asks the officer to “bear witness” about the wrong, if indeed Jesus has spoken wrongly. Throughout the Gospel of John, the Jews have asked Jesus to provide witnesses to validate his own ministry and authority (John 1:32–34; 5:31–47; 8:13–18; 10:25). Now, at the climax of Jesus’ battle with the Jews, “Jesus demands that his enemies bear witness.”²⁹ Although Jesus can point to the witness of John the Baptist, his works, and even the Scriptures themselves for his own defense, the Jews have no witnesses to give testimony to account for their treatment of Jesus. John records no response from the Jews, but only that Annas sent Jesus bound to Caiaphas the high priest (John 18:24): “From this point on Jesus is in the hands of Pilate.”³⁰ Jesus is innocent, and he brings countercharges against his accusers that will go unanswered until Jesus himself judges the living and the dead on the last day.

The Second and Third Denial

John’s literary command is masterful. John left us in suspense about Jesus to cut to Peter in time to see him deny his Master. Then, with Peter warming himself by the fire, John cut back to Jesus to see just enough of the sham trial to watch Jesus flip the tables on the Jews by asking for witnesses. Now, with Jesus heading off to Caiaphas (and, ultimately, Pilate), John cuts back to Peter, who is still warming himself by the fire in the hornet’s nest of the high priest’s courtyard. Given the quantity and quality of television and movies that we have become used to, we may take this kind of narrative skill for granted. We should not, especially since the cutting back and forth does more than merely to increase the narrative tension of what is going to happen to each person. In fact, Jesus’ faithfulness is contrasted *against* Peter’s faithlessness: “John has constructed a dramatic contrast wherein Jesus stands up to his questioners and denies nothing, while Peter cowers before his questioners and denies everything.”³¹

So, after having seen Jesus make the good confession before Annas, the weakness of Peter looks all the poorer:

[25] Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, “You also are not one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” [26] One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” [27] Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed. (John 18:25–27)

The second denial of Jesus must have been both harder and easier for Peter, albeit in different ways. On the one hand, the first question by the servant girl that even *expected* him to deny knowing Jesus may have caught him off guard. In this second case, he must have realized what he had done, perhaps with his mind working in overdrive to justify what he said. On the other hand, sin becomes easier the longer we practice it, so that for the second—and especially the third—denial, Peter spoke the words “I am not” (*ouk eimi*) with an increasingly hardened heart.³² We should learn from this by taking seriously our small sins, lest they increase into larger sins by our growing familiarity with rebelling against God.

It is in the question leading up to the third denial that Peter really starts to feel the heat. In John 18:25, as in John 18:17, the question had been posed to Peter expecting a negative answer: “You aren’t one of them, are you?” The third question, however, is phrased in such a way as to expect a *positive* answer: “I saw you in the garden with him, didn’t I?” (John 18:27).³³ John even tells us that this man was a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, suggesting that this was information Peter knew and weighed as he calculated whether to deny Jesus this third time. In any case, Peter did deny his Lord, and at once a rooster crowed, and, as the Synoptic Gospels relate, Peter is overcome with shame and sorrow over what he has done to his Master.

Why do all four Gospels include the denial of Peter? In many ways, this kind of story is one of the best authenticating marks of the stories about Jesus. This is too shameful for someone to create as a part of a larger fabricated story about Jesus. If Jesus’ disciples wished to make something up about him, why would one of their most prominent leaders allow this libelous story about his great weakness and failure to be included in those accounts—unless, of course, the whole story is *true*? But even more than verifying the reliability of these accounts in the Gospels, Peter’s story illustrates the great power of the gospel of Jesus: “In his [Peter’s] proclamation of the good news he will have freely confessed his disgraceful behavior, and his subsequent forgiveness and restoration, as an example of the readiness of the crucified and risen Lord to forgive sinners, even when they are as unworthy as the man who denied his Master.”³⁴ None of us are worthy of Jesus’ love, but if Jesus forgave Peter who tried to prevent Jesus from going to the cross and denied Jesus three times in the process, then he can certainly forgive sinners like you and me! Every bit of this story reveals both Jesus’ power and his love, for at the cross, Jesus most fully reveals his true identity.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the biblical/historical/theological significance of the fact that Jesus crossed the brook Kidron? What is the biblical/historical/theological significance of the fact that Jesus was confronted

by his betrayer in a garden? Why are those details important for making sense of Jesus' mission? What would be lost if we did not know those details?

2. What does Jesus reveal of his power during his arrest? Why doesn't he exercise it more fully? What does Jesus reveal of his love during his arrest? What do these elements in the garden of Gethsemane reveal about the power and love of your Savior in the midst of your pain, anguish, and sorrow *today*?

3. Why do you think all four Gospels include the story of Peter's denial of Jesus? What does it remind us about our own weaknesses? What does it teach us about our Lord's grace? How would you feel if your darkest failures were printed alongside Peter's in the Bible?

4. Clearly, Jesus does not plan on stopping his own crucifixion. Why, then, does Jesus bring countercharges against his accusers by asking them to "bear witness" to the wrong he has done, or else explain why they strike him (John 18:23)? What practical value does this scene have for us to know that Jesus has already condemned the wickedness of the world? How might that encourage, strengthen, or embolden us?

Notes

1. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1172.
2. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 375–76.
3. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 376.
4. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1173.
5. Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). Crowe argues convincingly that one of the chief purposes of the Gospel narratives is to demonstrate that Jesus succeeded in obedience as the last Adam where the first Adam failed.
6. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 190. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.viii.i.html>>
7. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 378.
8. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1081–82.
9. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 575–76.
10. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 191. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.viii.i.html>>
11. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 193. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.viii.ii.html>>
12. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1182.
13. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 193. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.viii.ii.html>>
14. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 577.
15. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 380.
16. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 579.
17. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1188.
18. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 661.

19. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 197. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.viii.iii.html>>
20. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 387–88.
21. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 88.
22. Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, *The Presidents Club: Inside the World's Most Exclusive Fraternity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).
23. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 386–87.
24. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 199. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.viii.iv.html>>
25. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 393.
26. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 667.
27. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 584.
28. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1095.
29. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 670.
30. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 583–84.
31. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 842. Cited in Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 585–86.
32. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 203–04. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.viii.vi.html>>
33. Köstenberger, *John*, 519, footnote 40.
34. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 326.