

Lesson Twenty-Three

(John 18:1-40)

The calm seminar-type teaching atmosphere in the upper room is about to be shattered by a rapid succession of momentous events. The apostles are about to see their beloved leader arrested, falsely accused, and condemned to death. The hours between this moment (very early on Friday morning) and Sunday morning will be agonizing ones, both for Jesus and for the disciples. No wonder Jesus asked the Father to "keep them safe from the Evil One" (17:15).

The Arrest of Jesus

(John 18:1-11)

¹After Jesus had said this prayer, he left with his disciples and went across Kidron Brook. There was a garden in that place, and Jesus and his disciples went in. ²Judas, the traitor, knew where it was, because many times Jesus had met there with his disciples.

³So Judas went to the garden, taking with him a group of Roman

soldiers, and some temple guards sent by the chief priests and the Pharisees; they were armed and carried lanterns and torches. ⁴Jesus knew everything that was going to happen to him, so he stepped forward and asked them, "Who is it you are looking for?"

⁵"Jesus of Nazareth," they answered.

"I am he," he said.

Judas, the traitor, was standing there with them. ⁶When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they moved back and fell to the ground.

⁷Again Jesus asked them, "Who is it you are looking for?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," they said.

⁸"I have already told you that I am he," Jesus said. "If, then, you are looking for me, let these others go." (⁹He said this so that what he had said might come true: "Father, I have not lost even one of those you gave me.")

¹⁰Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the High Priest's slave, cutting off his right ear. The name of the slave was Malchus. ¹¹Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back in its place! Do you think that I will not drink the cup of suffering which my Father has given me?"

On their way to the garden, Jesus and his apostles crossed the Kidron Brook, a tiny stream no larger than seven or eight feet wide even in the rainy season. But it was the ravine into which the blood of the temple sacrifices ran. No doubt Jesus was reminded of his own role as the sacrificial Lamb of God as he stepped across the brook, its water tinted red by the blood of hundreds of lambs.

We know from the other gospel accounts that Jesus went to the garden of Gethsemane, near the Mount of Olives, and spent some time there (Matt. 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-50; Luke 22:47-50). The disciples, "worn out by their grief," went to sleep while Jesus knelt nearby and fervently prayed that God's will would be done.

Since Judas Iscariot knew that Jesus often came to this particular garden, he was fairly certain that he could lead the large group of captors right to him. However, the men he had teamed up with were not taking any chances. They were armed and, although there was a full moon (as there always is during the Passover), the men carried lanterns and torches so they could search the areas darkened by the trees and bushes.

The other gospel accounts all mention the fact that Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, the customary Eastern greeting. But John is content to mention that Judas led them to Jesus (18:3).

Why was it that the soldiers and temple police "fell to the

ground" (18:6)? It may well be that these men had heard about the extraordinary powers which Jesus possessed and they just naturally assumed that they would have a battle on their hands when they finally chased him down. But to their surprise, they didn't have to chase him through the hills. Instead, he boldly stepped out of the shadows to confront them. When they realized who he was, he was already too close for comfort, so they fall over themselves trying to retreat a few steps.

Jesus has no intention of endangering the lives of his apostles (18:8-9), but leave it to Peter to almost foul up that plan. The big fisherman could not bear the thought of Jesus being taken away without a fight, so he pulls a sword and tries to make a "split personality" out of the nearest guard. But, being a fisherman and not a professional soldier, he only manages to slice off the ear of a man whom John identifies as Malchus, a slave of the High Priest. And no sooner had Peter's victim cried out in pain than Jesus reached over and "touched the man's ear and healed him" (Luke 22:51). Then he rebukes Peter for interfering with God's great plan.

Jesus Before Annas

(John 18:12-14)

¹²Then the Roman soldiers with their commanding officer and the Jewish guards arrested Jesus, tied him up, ¹³and took him first to Annas. He was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was High Priest that year. ¹⁴It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jewish authorities that it was better that one man should die for all the people.

Annas had been appointed High Priest (Acts 4:6; Luke 3:2) by Quirinius in about 6 A.D., but he was removed from that office in 14 A.D. It was in about 25 A.D. that his son-in-law, Joseph Caiaphas, became the High Priest and remained in the office until 35 A.D. The Jews at this time, however, still looked to Annas as the real High Priest. That's why Jesus was taken to him first.

Peter's First Denial of Jesus

(John 18:15-18)

¹⁵Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. That other disciple was well known to the High Priest, so he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the High Priest's house, ¹⁶while Peter stayed outside by the gate. Then the other disciple went back out, spoke to the girl at the gate, and brought Peter inside. ¹⁷The girl at the

gate said to Peter, "Aren't you also one of the disciples of that man?"

"No, I am not," answered Peter.

¹⁸It was cold, so the servants and guards had built a charcoal fire and were standing around it, warming themselves. So Peter went over and stood with them, warming himself.

Some critics have charged that there is a conflict between John's account and that of the other gospel writers because the others mention that Peter's first denial took place in the palace of Caiaphas. However, the fact is that "Annas and Caiaphas occupied the same palace, and the courtyard where Peter denied the Lord was in front of both apartments" (Burton Coffman, *Commentary on John*, p. 190). In any event, Peter now has one strike against him and more on the way.

Annas Questions Jesus

(John 18:19-24)

¹⁹The High Priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. ²⁰Jesus answered, "I have always spoken publicly to everyone; all my teaching was done in the synagogues and in the Temple, where all the people come together. I have never said anything in secret. ²¹Why, then, do you question me? Question the people who heard me. Ask them what I told them — they know what I said."

²²When Jesus said this, one of the guards there slapped him and said, "How dare you talk like that to the High Priest!"

²³Jesus answered him, "If I have said anything wrong, tell everyone here what it was. But if I am right in what I have said, why do you hit me?"

²⁴Then Annas sent him, still tied up, to Caiaphas the High Priest.

Jesus actually went through six trials, standing before Annas, then Caiaphas, then the Jewish Sanhedrin, then before Pilate, before Herod, and back to Pilate (Matt. 26:57-59; Mark 14:53-59; Luke 22:66-71; 23:6-12). But John concentrates our attention primarily on his examination before Annas and Pilate. And here "Jesus turns the tables. He demands that they produce witnesses to testify. He has no secrets to conceal. These judges knew that they had no evidence to present against Him. The demand of Jesus that they bring witnesses to testify brings their lack of evidence into the open" (Paul Butler, *The Gospel of John*, II, 364).

Peter Denies Jesus Again

(John 18:25-27)

²⁵Peter was still standing there keeping himself warm. So the others said to him, "Aren't you also one of the disciples of that man?"

But Peter denied it. "No, I am not," he said.

²⁶One of the High Priest's slaves, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, spoke up. "Didn't I see you with him in the garden?" he asked.

²⁷Again Peter said "No" — and at once a rooster crowed.

Here the apostle Peter publicly denies Jesus for the second and third time in a matter of hours. He was in a difficult position. So he resorts to lying and profanity to escape being branded as a follower of Jesus. Luke records that after the third denial the Lord, probably as he was being led through the courtyard, "turned around and looked straight at Peter, and Peter remembered that the Lord had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows tonight, you will say three times that you do not know me.' Peter went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:61-62).

Jesus is Tried by Pilate

(John 18:28-40)

²⁸Early in the morning Jesus was taken from Caiaphas' house to the governor's palace. The Jewish authorities did not go inside the palace, for they wanted to keep themselves ritually clean, in order to eat the Passover meal. ²⁹So Pilate went outside to them and asked, "What do you accuse this man of?"

³⁰Their answer was, "We would not have brought him to you if he had not committed a crime."

³¹Pilate said to them, "Then you yourselves take him and try him according to your own law."

They replied, "We are not allowed to put anyone to death." (³²This happened in order to make come true what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he would die.)

³³Pilate went back into the palace and called Jesus. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asked him.

³⁴Jesus answered, "Does this question come from you or have others told you about me?"

³⁵Pilate replied, "Do you think I am a Jew? It was your own people and the chief priests who handed you over to me. What have you done?"

³⁶Jesus said, "My kingdom does not belong here!"

³⁷So Pilate asked him, "Are you a king, then?"

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this one purpose, to speak about the truth. Whoever belongs to the truth listens to me."

³⁸"And what is truth?" Pilate asked.

Then Pilate went back outside to the people and said to them, "I cannot find any reason to condemn him. ³⁹But according to the custom you have, I always set free a prisoner for you during the Passover. Do you want me to set free for you the king of the Jews?"

⁴⁰They answered him with a shout, "No, not him! We want Barabbas!" (Barabbas was a bandit.)

John bypasses the trials before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, focusing instead upon Pilate and his willingness to let the Jews have their way. Pilate had been appointed governor of Judea by Tiberius Caesar in 26 A.D., and remained in that office until 36 A.D. He had little respect for the Jews and seems to have pushed them as far as he could at every opportunity. When he moved his headquarters from Caesarea to Jerusalem, he paraded the image of Caesar (whom the Romans regarded as god-like) through the streets and thereby stirred up a riot which resulted in his finally removing the images from Jerusalem. Then he aggravated the Jews by raiding the Temple treasury to get money with which to build an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem. He had been sent there to establish peace and order, but had made a mess of things so far.

So he has adopted an attitude of compromise to keep from losing his job. And when these Jews come to see him, it is he who is inconvenienced — he comes outside his palace to talk with them, because that is what they demanded. These very religious people who were conspiring to murder an innocent man, did not want to become ceremonially defiled by entering the Greek governor's home. That would have interfered with their participation in the Passover festivities!

The Jews wanted Jesus out of the way because he claimed to be the Messiah, but they knew that Pilate would not be moved by that charge. So they accused him of being a political enemy of the Roman government, and that put the matter squarely in Pilate's lap (18:31-32). That is why Pilate asks Jesus whether he is, as the Jews accused him of saying, king of the Jews (18:33).

Jesus explains that his kingdom is not of this world (18:36), but that he is indeed a king (18:37). He further reveals his purpose is not political revolution but revelation of truth. And Pilate, who certainly does not "belong to the truth" (18:37), fails to really

comprehend Jesus' meaning, so he sarcastically asks, "What is truth?"

After all, the only two truths that really mattered to Pilate at that moment were these: (1) Jesus has done nothing worthy of death; and (2) the Jews cannot be allowed to blow this up into a full-scale riot. So he first offers to release Jesus (18:39), only to be shouted down by hysterical shouts of "No, not him! We want Barabbas!" It is a sad day when any leader, whether religious or political, shows himself to be empty of courage and integrity.

Thought Stimulators on John 18:1-40

1. Who led the soldiers and temple guards to Jesus?
2. What is the name of the place where Jesus was arrested?
3. Why was it that the soldiers and temple guards "fell to the ground"?
4. Why did Jesus stop Peter from fighting to protect him?
5. Name the first person before whom Jesus was brought to trial.
6. Why did Peter deny that he knew Jesus?
7. In what ways is it possible for a Christian today to deny Jesus?
8. Have you ever had someone you trusted suddenly turn against you? Compare the feelings you experienced with how Jesus must have felt at the actions of Judas.
9. Why did the Jews refuse to enter Pilate's palace?
10. Jesus said that everyone who "belongs to the truth" will do what?
11. What is truth? Write down the dictionary definition, then give your own idea.
12. Do a little soul-searching by putting yourself in Peter's place. Chose *one* of the answers in each section below:
 - (a) I would have reacted to the questions by: (1) changing the subject; (2) doing the same thing Peter did; (3) standing up for Jesus.
 - (b) The most intense pressure on me to deny Jesus comes from my: (1) close friends, (2) relatives; (3) fellow-workers or classmates.