

Religion on Trial

John 18:12-27

Call: Isa 55:6-9 (NLT)

Scripture: John 1:1, 14, 16-18 (ESV)

I. Introduction

A. Introduction

Good morning! My name is Shawn Reese. I'm one of the pastors here. And, we continue our studies today in the sacred texts of the Passion narrative from John's perspective.

"You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" It sounds like a simple yes/no question, doesn't it? In our text today, this question is posed to Peter, the lead disciple of Jesus' followers. And, for Peter, it seems like he should easily and proudly answer yes. After all, just a few hours earlier in an upper room somewhere in downtown Jerusalem, Peter had proudly declared his loyalty to Jesus saying, "[I will follow you anywhere.] *I will even lay down my life for you.* The others may give in, but I never will Lord!"

And, now, only a few hours later, *"You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?"* And Peter's answer? *"I am not."*

All four Gospels contain Peter's failure. And why? They could have protected their friend's reputation and left this story out, couldn't they have? Or could it be that Peter wants this story in because he knows his story of failing will help future disciples learn the nature of true discipleship?

B. Prayer

O Lord, by your Word & by your Spirit, open the eyes of our hearts this morning and give us ears to hear your Word well this morning. In Jesus' name, Amen.

C. Review

Last week, we opened the passion story with Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas had brought a mob with him with lights and weapons to arrest Jesus. In those 12 verses, John set us up for the rest of the narrative. And, particularly there were four points he wanted to make sure we knew so we could understand the rest of the story:

1. **We know Jesus is the one in charge of the events.** The other actors in the story may think they are running the show, but they're not. Jesus is.
2. **We know Jesus watches out for those he loves.** The disciples don't need swords because they are in the hands of the great I AM.
3. **We know what is happening is the will of Jesus' Father.** What will happen will not be a mistake. Jesus will drink the cup the Father has given him to drink for the sake of the world.

4. **We know who it is who is going to the cross.** Answer: The great I AM. God is the one they arrested in the garden. God will be interrogated today and God will ultimately die on that cross.

D. Preview

Now that we have that in place, we can enter into our text today. After Jesus' arrest, he is led away to several interrogations. There is so much to say around these interrogations, but one important thing to say is this. Although Jesus is in the dock, so to speak, throughout these interrogations, he's not the one on trial. The ones actually on trial today are:

1. The religious leaders, as represented by Annas and Caiaphas.
2. The disciples, as represented by Peter.

Religion is on trial today, and both interrogations will happen at exactly the same time. John takes us back and forth between the two: first Jesus, then Peter, then Jesus, then Peter. Why does he do this? As most scholars recognize, John is setting up a "dramatic contrast" for us. And what we will see is that Jesus will stand before his questioners and deny nothing, while Peter will stand before his questioners and deny everything.

So, I invite you into the text, beginning in chapter 18, verse 12. This is the first scene of Jesus' interrogation.

II. The Interrogation of Jesus: Scene #1 (12-14)

[12](#) So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him. [13](#) First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. [14](#) It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people. (ESV)

A. Annas and Caiaphas

So, we are very early in the morning on Good Friday. The mob arrests and binds Jesus, and takes him to Annas. Why Annas? John tells us that he is Caiaphas' father-in-law. According to John, it sounds like Caiaphas is the actual high priest. So, who really is the high priest? If it is Caiaphas, why do they go to Annas?

A quick history lesson: From what is known, Annas was the "patriarch of the high priestly family" during this time period (Carson, 581). He had been selected to be high priest in AD 6 and stayed high priest until AD 15. But, in AD 15, Annas was removed from office by the Roman governor. The Romans then appointed the successors to Annas. This did not sit well with the Jews because the Old Testament said that the high priest was appointed for life. And, so, Annas was still considered to be the real high priest by the Jews regardless of what Rome said. So, Jesus is appropriately brought to Annas first, even though Caiaphas is the official high priest. It is a bit confusing.

B. Caiaphas

John is also careful to add that Caiaphas was the one, back in chapter 11, who said, *“it is better for you that one man should die for the people, than that the whole nation perish”* (John 11:50). As I said then, Caiaphas is simply saying what Jesus himself has already said in this Gospel.

- In chapter 6, Jesus said he would give himself *“for the life of the world.”* (John 6:51).
- In chapter 10, Jesus said that he, the good shepherd, would *“lay down his life for the sheep”* (John 10:11).

So Caiaphas is simply repeating Jesus’ words, which is the Gospel. God can use anyone to prophesy. He can even use a donkey, as he did in the Old Testament (Num 22:21-39). Here, God announces the Gospel through a high priest who wants to destroy Jesus.

Meanwhile, Peter enters his interrogation, verse 15.

III. The Interrogation of Peter: Scene #1 (15-18)

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. (ESV)

A. Introduction

All the other disciples have deserted Jesus, except for one unnamed disciple and Peter. The unnamed disciple is usually understood to be John, the writer of the Gospel. I agree, and apparently, John’s family is related to, or friends with, the high priestly family, which allows him to go inside the court, and bring Peter with him.

B. Peter

A quick history lesson on Peter: Peter is the lead disciple and most famous of the twelve, and has had several noteworthy moments in the Gospels.

- In this Gospel, he is the first person in which Jesus promises transformation. In chapter 1, Jesus says, *“You are Simon... You shall be called Cephas, which means Peter [or rock]”* (John 1:42). You’re shifting sand now Simon, but someday you’ll be Rocky.
- Also in this Gospel, after the crowds stop following Jesus, Jesus says to the twelve, *“Do you want to go away as well?”* Peter replies with, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God”* (John 6:67-68).
- In the Synoptics, Peter is the first one to confess that Jesus is *“the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”* (Matt 16:16).
- And Peter is also the only other person besides Jesus to walk on water!

And, he is now on trial.

C. The Testing

And, a lowly, status-less, servant girl, who John seems to emphasize, thinks Peter is one of Jesus' disciples. So she asks him. Peter responds, *"I am not."* Peter fails before a lowly servant girl.

How do you think he felt in that moment? Only a few hours ago, *"I will lay my life down for you Jesus."* And, now, *"I am not."* Maybe he's thinking – well, this isn't a real test. She's just a servant girl.

D. The Charcoal Fire

John then gives us a very important detail. Peter and the others are warming themselves next to a *charcoal* fire. John is careful to tell us what kind of fire it is. It's a charcoal fire. We'll come back to it at the end.

Meanwhile, back to the interrogation of Jesus, verse 19.

IV. The Interrogation of Jesus: Scene #2 (19-24)

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." 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.

A. Introduction

Scene two gives Jesus the chance to say that he has spoken openly to the world, which he has. A primary example is his last *public* sermon earlier that week when the crowds were streaming into Jerusalem. He said these famous words, *"24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24)*. That was Jesus' last public sermon in John, and it's a key to the unfolding events we are now reading.

B. The Slap

After Jesus says he has spoken openly to the world, one of the officers strikes him, to which Jesus responds with, *"If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?"* In this interaction, Jesus is simply wanting a fair trial. In particular, he wants them to call in witnesses for a trial. He knows the first century Jewish law that witnesses were to be brought in before the high priest. In fact, a defendant was not to be interrogated until the witnesses arrived.

C. The Significance?

Regardless, nothing of great significance happens in these two scenes before the high priests. Yet, throughout our text, the word for “high priest” occurs 8 times. So John draws our attention to the office of high priest yet seems to create so much confusion around it. Could it be that nothing of note really happens in order to raise in our minds who the true high priest is?

Bernard of course just spent several weeks in Hebrews exploring this theme, so let me review.

D. The True High Priest

In the Old Testament, among the many priests, one was selected as the High Priest. Whereas the king represented God to the people, the high priest represented the people to God. He was appointed by God to intercede for the people by offering sacrifices for the people and for himself. This allowed for sinful people to approach a holy God, or as Bernard said, “The various sacred rites [of the high priest] allowed a holy God to dwell in the midst of a sinful people” (Bell, 04-23-23).

And, here in John, standing before the reigning high priest, Caiaphas or is it Annas, is Jesus, arrested and bound, and in control of the situation. He, Jesus, will walk through these events as an act of surrender as a sacrificial offering, as a grain of wheat. He is the true high priest offering himself as the sacrifice. As Bernard also taught us in Hebrews, Jesus is the one offering the sacrifice, and he *is* the sacrifice. And, through his sacrifice, *“he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him,”* as Hebrews says.

E. Conclusion

Jesus is the true high priest. Although he’s not being treated like one, he sure is acting like one. He is acting like one. Meanwhile, the religious leaders, who are really on trial, are failing.

Meanwhile, we go back to the interrogation of Peter, verse 25.

V. The Interrogation of Peter: Scene #2 (25-27)

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.

A. Introduction

Oh Peter. As Judas stood with the darkness in the garden, Peter now stands with the darkness in the courtyard. And, the group around the fire repeat the servant girl’s accusation. Peter again denies it, *“I am not.”*

Peter, here’s your chance! Here’s your chance to shine Peter! *“I am not.”*

A servant of the high priest then repeats the accusation. Peter again denies it for a 3rd time. The narrator doesn’t have to say again what Peter said because we already know what he said, *“I am not.”* And, the rooster crows, fulfilling Jesus’ prediction (John 13:36-38).

How does Peter now feel? We all know don't we? We all know he feels awful. The other Gospels tell us that Peter went out and wept bitterly. We know he feels like a failure. We know he now feels disqualified to be a disciple of Jesus. It's a sobering moment for the lead disciple.

B. Jesus Doesn't Intervene

And, Jesus just lets it happen? Luke says Jesus could see Peter in the courtyard. So Jesus could have helped Peter, right? Jesus could have called out to Peter, "Peter, tell them you're one of mine. Peter, stand strong!" But, he doesn't. Jesus lets Peter fail. Why?

C. The Nature of True Discipleship

Because in this moment, Peter has to learn the nature of true discipleship. In this moment, Peter discovers he cannot make it on his own. Peter discovers he cannot be the disciple he wants to be on his own. *"I will lay down my life for you, Jesus! I'll follow you anywhere Jesus!"* Peter must be humbled. Even more, he must be undone. Peter has to learn that he must die to himself in order to live. Like the prodigal, Peter must be brought to the end of his senses to wake up.

Peter had tried to be the hero and failed. And, that is ok, because Jesus doesn't want heroes. Jesus wants disciples. Heroes think they can do everything on their own. Heroes think they don't need any help. Heroes think they are self-sufficient. Jesus lets Peter die the hero so that he may know the nature of true discipleship. This is good for Peter!

Disciples know they cannot make it on their own. Disciples know the path of true discipleship is to lose one's life. Disciples know the path of true discipleship is becoming a grain of wheat, just like their master, dying to self, self-will, self-sufficiency and self-empowerment. Disciples know they must die to thinking they are experts about life, and choose instead to follow Jesus, the way, the truth and the life. Disciples know that they are utterly dependent on Jesus for everything. After all Jesus already told us that in chapter 15. He said, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). Jesus intends to teach Peter (and us) that very truth.

And we know Jesus is dependable and faithful don't we? As Peter has denied everything, Jesus has denied nothing. He is the faithful one. He is the rock. *"On Christ the solid rock we stand. All other ground is sinking sand."* Peter needed to learn that truth. And, this is where he learns it.

D. The Greatness of Grace

But, Peter also learned another great truth in this story. He discovers that Jesus will not let him on the ground. Peter fails, but failure does not have to be final. After all Jesus wants Peter to be a disciple. And, so, Peter also discovers in this story the greatness of grace. As John told us in the prologue, our Scripture Reading today, Jesus ushers in the era of "grace and truth," and from his fullness of grace and truth, we receive "grace upon grace."

Several years ago, a friend of mine did a devotional for a group of us as we sat on a beach. And, he shared that as the waves continue to crash, we can think of each wave being God's grace washing over us. Each wave washing us in his grace. Grace upon grace upon grace upon grace... His grace is greater than our failures.

E. The Charcoal Fire

So, where is the grace in this story? Answer: the charcoal fire. John tells us it is a charcoal fire, not just a fire, a charcoal fire.

From that day on, every time Peter would smell a charcoal fire, what do you think he would think of? He would think of his failure. He would think of his denials. He would think of *"I am not."* Our sense of smell is powerful, isn't it?

In Liberia, they burn a lot of charcoal, and every time we land there and walk across the tarmac, I smell the charcoal smell and I know I'm in Liberia and memories and friendships flood back into my mind.

Every time Peter would smell a charcoal fire, he would think failure. But, failure does not have to be final. And, it wasn't for Peter.

Later that day, Jesus would die on that cross, and Peter would think it was all over. There was no way to fix his failure.

Three days later, though, everything changes. Jesus is resurrected! But, through it all, there is that smell, that horrible smell of a charcoal fire, the smell of failure. *"I am not."*

But, then, a few weeks after the resurrection, Peter and some other disciples have gone back to Galilee to go fishing. Peter thought he was disqualified for discipleship, so he decided to go back to what he knew best – fishing. But, Jesus doesn't think Peter is disqualified!

So, while they're fishing, Jesus appears on the beach and he builds what? A charcoal fire, John 21:9.

Peter and the others come ashore, and what do you think Peter felt when he smelled that charcoal fire? What did he think when he stood face-to-face with the man he denied he knew over another charcoal fire?

Around that charcoal fire, Jesus asks Peter three times, *"Do you love me?"* And Peter answers *"Yes"* three times. Why three times? One for each of the times Peter said, *"I am not."* The Great *I AM* heals Peter's *"I AM not."* Peter you cannot stand on your own. Peter you are not your own savior. Peter, you are not your own Lord. Peter, you are not the way. Peter, you are not the truth. Peter, you are not the life. Jesus says, *I AM!*

Jesus redeems the charcoal fire, by covering Peter in grace upon grace upon grace. During that conversation, Peter discovers “amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” Failure does not have to be final in His kingdom, because there is grace upon grace upon grace, like the waves of the ocean. And Peter is transformed into rocky which we later see in Acts and his letters.

F. Offering Grace To Others

And, because we’ve had wave upon wave upon wave of grace crashing over us, we can in turn offer grace to others, can we not? This is the ripple effect of grace. We can love because he first loved us. We can extend forgiveness because we’ve been forgiven. We can extend compassion because we’ve been shown compassion. We are all works in progress, so we can offer space for others to be works in progress. And, this is why we do RSCP and the Discovery Dinner Outreach and Grace Village and the prison ministry and Abrahamic Alliance and Mexico and Liberia, because failure does not have to be final for others as it is with us. Amen.

VI. Communion

A. Introduction

Today, we get to come to the table to celebrate God’s waves of grace. Every time we celebrate communion, we celebrate the gift of grace. For this is the table of grace. We come to the table as sinners in need of waves of grace, like Peter. And, our host, the Lord Jesus Christ, meets us with that grace and compassion and forgiveness – with open arms. In the Gospels, Jesus made it a habit of eating with sinners. So, at this table, the table of grace. *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast”* (Eph 2:8-9).

B. Fence

All those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior are invited to participate in communion at PBCC. Let’s take a moment in silence to thank the Lord and to prepare our hearts, as the team plays.

C. Prayer

Let’s pray together.

Father, we praise and thank you for loving us and giving all of yourself to us in your Son Jesus Christ. We do not presume to come to your table, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your all-embracing love and grace. We are not worthy even to gather the crumbs under your table, but it is your character to always show mercy.

Grant us, therefore, God of mercy, so to eat at this, Your table, that we may receive in spirit and in truth the body of Your dear Son, Jesus Christ, and the merits of His precious blood, so that we may live and grow in His likeness and, being forgiven, washed and cleansed through His most precious blood, we may evermore live in You and You in us. Amen.

D. Words of Institution

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, [24](#) and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” [26](#) For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Amen.

Benediction

If you would like prayer this morning, there will be friends up here who would love to pray with you.

Now receive this benediction which appropriately comes from the hand of Peter:

As you go –

[2](#) May [our great] God give you more and more grace and peace as you grow in your knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord. [3](#) By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. (2 Pet 1:2-3)

Now go and depend on him and his great grace to live that life. Amen.

Resources

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *God Is On The Cross*

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Burge, Gary, *John (NIV Application Commentary)*

Carson, Don, *The Gospel According to John*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching John (Regent College Course)*

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*