

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part sixty-six

Sunday, January 18th, 2015, 10:00 a.m.

Teaching #1777 - Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church

WHY DO ALL FOUR GOSPELS GIVE SO MUCH SPACE TO THE ACCOUNT OF THE APOSTLE PETER'S DENIAL OF JESUS?

John 18:12-27 - "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. [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. [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. [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."

I don't think we consider ourselves as fortunate as we ought in having *four* separate gospel accounts instead of just *one* long one. In having four *separate* accounts we not only get the story, we get to see what *four* different inspired writers *emphasized*. We get not only the bare *facts*, we get to see what these four inspired apostles *collectively* felt was most vital to the future of the church. The Holy Spirit can register, not just what *happened*, but can *repeat with varied emphasis and from different angles* the events to which we should give additional *weight and consideration*.

It's surprising how few events are covered in all four gospel accounts. You might think there are dozens. You'd be wrong. In fact, removing the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, there are only *three* events covered in all four gospels. And aside from the *multiplication of the loaves* and *Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem*, the only other event unanimously recorded is the account of *Peter's denial of Jesus*.

We're going to spend most of our time looking into Peter's colossal failure. We're going to focus on it because the gospels themselves place emphasis here. But there's so much more in this account. We'll have to hurry to get through it:

1) **JOHN CAN'T MENTION CAIAPHAS WITHOUT REWINDING OUR THOUGHTS TO THIS HIGH PRIEST'S PROPHECY ABOUT JESUS' DEATH**

John 18:12-14 - "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.*"

John is a skillful writer. He tells us something about *Caiaphas* even though Caiaphas isn't involved in the questioning of Jesus in today's text. That interrogation will be done by *Annas*, Caiaphas' son-in-law. But John takes a moment to fix our attention on *Caiaphas*. This is John's way, as he looks *back* years later on the events of the crucifixion, of reminding his readers these events didn't just happen. As the tension mounts and the drama unfolds it might be easy to get caught up in the *action* without grasping the *meaning*. And John won't let that happen.

His opening comments on the capture and arrest of Jesus remind us this was no ordinary crime drama or tale of political intrigue. John stops all the action just for a moment and pulls all our minds back to something he recorded earlier in his account. This same high priest, *Caiaphas*, is the speaker:

John 11:50-52 - "Nor do you understand that *it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.*" [51] He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year *he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, [52] and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.*"

The words of that first sentence are those of *Caiaphas*. The following *explanation* of those words is that of *John*. And here's why those words are so important for us this morning. There always *have* been and always *will* be those who read the account of Jesus' death rinsed of any atoning significance. In this *naturalized* interpretation the death of Jesus of Nazareth becomes merely *heroic* as some kind of *moral example* in the face of injustice or *tragic* as some kind of *political revolution gone sour*.

The Apostle John will have none of it. *He* was there and he won't allow the death of Jesus to be neutered of its redemptive meaning. That's why John very cleverly declares the *high priest* at that time - the one in charge of the spilling of innocent lamb's blood over and over - *that* high priest, says John - though not a follower of God's Messiah in any sense - was sovereignly directed by the Spirit of God to prophecy in advance that this Jesus was dying for others rather than Himself.

This is the Apostle's method. First John the baptist, on first sight of our Lord, proclaims Him as the "*Lamb of God*" *taking away the world's sin*. And then, in our text today, as that divine Lamb is prepared to spill His own blood, the *sacrificial leader* of all the Jewish people gives this prophecy - almost *against* his own will as John words it - that this Lamb will die for "*...the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad*" (11:52).

So as Jesus enters His final hours in our text today John can't resist reminding us the very High Priest before whom Jesus will stand predicted the *meaning* of the execution he himself was prosecuting. Think about it. The *prosecution* is sovereignly directed by God to declare it is *wrong* in its verdict before Jesus is even sentenced. God is bearing testimony to His divine mission.

2) **THE FIRST STEP IN DENYING JESUS ISN'T TAKEN WHERE MOST PEOPLE THINK**

John 18:15-18 - "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."

Peter's denial of Jesus doesn't *begin* with Jesus directly. He will end up cursing that he even *knows* Jesus. Or, perhaps more tellingly, in Mark's account, he denies and curses he even knows "*this man*" (14:71). Really Peter? "*This man?*" After proclaiming, "*Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God,*" you won't even use Jesus' *name* in front of these people? "*This man?*" That's how loyal you are to Jesus?

To be fair, Peter *wants* to be more loyal than he *is*. That's why he's following Jesus when all but one of the others fled. Peter is trying to stay close to his Lord. And look how he ends up - "*Never heard of this man! Curse....curse....curse*" How did he fall so far?

The servant girl's question is the softest question of the three Peter will face - "*You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?*" (17). As I said a minute ago, the question isn't directly about *Jesus*. It's about Jesus' *disciples* - "*That group - those followers who seem to always be together - is that your crowd, Peter? Where are you connected? What's your fellowship? What's your association?*"

Peter's denial doesn't start at the *center*. It starts at the *fringes* and *works its way* to the center. Peter doesn't turn on *Jesus* - not at first. He puts distance between himself and the *group*. Before Peter denies *Jesus* he denies the *fellowship* of Jesus' followers.

Remember, *all* the gospels record the anatomy of Peter's denial. They all analyze and record it, remembering they write their accounts for the instruction of the church. Unanimously, there is something these Apostles want seriously considered. Peter's denial is recorded as a *church* lesson.

And here's the application. Loyalty to Jesus doesn't happen just because one tries really hard to love *Jesus*. Just as you can't reach the Father except through the Son, you can't really love the Son properly except through loving His body, the church. Loyalty to Jesus can't be nourished *directly* between just you and Jesus in this present world. Devotion to Jesus can never be merely *personal* devotion. Loyalty to Jesus happens *through* loyalty to His church. That's why the church is called the *"body of Christ."* The way the *church* is treated is the way *Jesus* is treated.

For any who would doubt this principle I would simply refer to the words of our risen Lord Himself to the soon-to-be-converted Saul/Paul - Acts 9:4-6 - "**And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'**" [5] And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am *Jesus, whom you are persecuting.* [6] **But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."**

Now, any reasonable person could argue Paul had nothing whatsoever to do with the execution of Jesus. We have no record whatsoever of any contact between Paul and Jesus while our Lord walked this earth. Paul never laid a hand on Jesus - perhaps never even met Him directly.

But only the most stubbornly blind interpreter could deny our Lord accused Saul (Paul) of persecuting Jesus Himself. Jesus makes this direct accusation twice in two verses - "**And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'**" [5] And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*"

Persecute the church and you persecute Jesus. Desert the church and you desert Jesus. Neglect the church and you neglect Jesus. There are huge implications to this. The church is where loyalty to Christ is fed and sustained. And it will be in neglecting the church that disloyalty to Christ nibbles at the edges of your life. And the reason all four gospels record this is it may well be we followers of Jesus don't consider it deeply enough.

It is hard to follow Jesus alone. But that isn't because of some deficiency in His beauty or greatness. And it is no reflection on His divine provision and promise. It is simply because that is not how loyalty to Christ is sustained. Solitary devotion to Jesus may not be absolutely *impossible*, but it's incredibly *rare* and almost never *sustained*.

3) THERE IS SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL IN THE SELF-EFFACING TESTIMONY OF THE APOSTLE JOHN

John 18:15-16 - "**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.**"

Because of John's previous anonymous references to himself in his account it is almost universally acknowledged that this *"other disciple" (16)* is the Apostle John himself. No one can *prove* that, but it seems highly probable.

It's worth a brief pause to admire John here. As he records so fully the tragic denial and fall of Peter John becomes aware his faithful following of Jesus right to the end would only serve to make Peter look *worse* in comparison to John and John look incredibly spiritual in comparison to Peter.

And John will have none of that. He gives us this tiny cryptic reference to his presence only because he wants us to know his account is accurate in all the details and incredibly reliable because he was right there by Jesus' side to the end. But he won't have any glory taken away from the Lamb dying for our sins.

That's perfect. When you have a legitimate opportunity for pride and refuse to take it you have just grown spiritually.

4) PETER'S FIRST DENIAL IS IMMEDIATELY CONTRASTED WITH OUR LORD'S STEADFASTNESS AND FAITHFULNESS IN FRONT OF ANNAS

John 18:19-24 - "**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."

I think John means for us to notice the *one-piece consistency* in Jesus' response as compared to Peter's compromising testimony. Peter was bold in declaring his willingness to die for Jesus when with the rest of the disciples. He reached for his sword in the garden when with the others. But a young girl's question strikes fear into his soul alone by the fire.

John compares this with Jesus' response to His persecutors' questions - John 18:20-21 - "...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's point is Jesus always said the *same thing*. These leaders tried to insinuate Jesus was the leader of a secret seditious cult - that He tried to be one thing on the surface but was something different underneath.

To all of this Jesus said, "**Just check it out. It's all public record.**" Nothing hidden. Nothing dodged. Nothing two-faced. One unchanging, unaltered message. This is still the message of the gospel today.

5) IN ANY SPIRITUAL DECLINE THE SOONER DENIAL IS CONFRONTED AND REPENTED OF THE BETTER

John 18:25-27 - "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."

It's no secret that *Mark's* gospel gives different details of Peter's denial:

Mark 14:66-72 - "And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, [67] and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." [68] But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. [69] And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." [70] But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." [71] But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this man of whom you speak." [72] And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept."

If I were putting the New Testament together I would have eliminated accounts that differed. If one were concocting the message it seems obvious to have all rooster accounts crowing either once or twice. But not one once and another twice. How hard could it be to fix that?

Of course, it's simple to point out the obvious. If the rooster crowed *twice* it did also crow *once*. But is that all there is to it? Or is there something *Mark's* two-crowing account means to reveal?

Are we meant to see the way small denials - small compromises - always weaken our souls more than we feel at the moment? Think about it. Why, on Mark's reckoning, wouldn't Peter have owned up to his first denial after hearing the first crowing of the rooster? *Two* crowings means the *first* is a *warning* crowing. It's the red flag.

Right then. Right there. Peter could have seen the *beginning* of the fulfillment of Jesus' prediction. Right there he could have turned things around and owned up to His Lord. I mean, Peter *saw and heard* absolute proof of the approaching disaster *before* it finalized.

But one lie leads to another. One denial *requires* another. Peter can't turn things around. That first little girl's *fellowship question* undid more in Peter's will than he imagined.

Only Luke tells us as soon as Peter denied Jesus and the rooster crowed *Jesus turned and looked directly at Peter* (Luke 22:61). Could anything in all the world have hurt more than that? Peter would have died himself if he could have turned back time and avoided that look.

Is Jesus being cruel in that look toward Peter or gracious? I'm arguing He was being gracious. And here's why Mark's **two crowing account** sheds a bright light on the whole subject of sin and repentance. Repentance isn't a light breezy thing. Repentance must be full of angst and horror. The fact that Peter heard the first crowing of the rooster and yet **still persisted in the same sinful course** showed Peter his sin, like yours and mine, was **not something he had power to deal with**. There is no depth of repentance until the sinner is **shocked, morally jarred** somehow, by his or her sinfulness.

I have an old book I have come to treasure over the years. I've read it many times but only recently began to **grow into it**. Listen to these wise words of **Peter Forsyth** in **"The Centrality of the Cross"** and think of Peter's self-discovery in Mark's **two-crowing account**:

"If there be such blots of sin in a life, and especially if a man sins after his forgiveness in a grievous way, he gets such a shock in the revelation of sin's tough and subtle power that it needs something very final and decisive to assure him of its destruction. He must then have a grace which is not simple and self-evident - for 'lightly come, lightly go.' He must have a finished work, and a God who has made a full end....A conscience in his state....must have a grace and a salvation which is not benign, but gathers up the total of his moral situation in one act, and settles the great conflict once and for all....He must have more than forgiveness. He must have a final redemption....A man needs something to make him confident that his past sin, and the sin he is yet sure to commit, are all taken up into God's redemption, and the great transaction of his moral life is done."

Of course, we all know now there was marvelous grace for Christ-cursing Peter. Mark gives another grace-filled detail that's relevant to our study today. As the women come early resurrection morning to the tomb of Jesus they find it empty. They find what Mark simply calls a **"young man"** sitting by the entry. They get the wonderful news Jesus has risen.

And then Peter gets the best news of all - **Mark 16:6-7** - **"And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. [7] But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."**

We all **need** grace this rugged and final. We need something that can reach into those sins we regretfully **intended** to commit - the ones we have **no excuse** for committing.

"Tell Peter I'm alive. And that means my death finally atoned for sins just like his!"