

Judas, Peter, and Us

Sermon · Not stated

Today we will look at Mark chapter 14, verses 52 to the end of the chapter. These passages depict two critical events interwoven together during our Lord's last mile journey towards His goal — His death on the Roman Cross, bearing the sin of all humanity. We have to constantly remind ourselves that, sinless as He was, He died for me and you, for our redemption.

The two events are: (a) His trial before the Sanhedrin, a Jewish judicial body, and (b) Peter's denial of Christ. We will look at these events from the perspective of what they teach us. However, before we do that, I want us to back up a bit and revisit the prelude to these events — that is where we concluded our discussion last week.

Here we saw a band of rude miscreants come to our Lord Jesus and make Him a prisoner. It was a great multitude with swords and staves. Few actions in the history of mankind have been so miserably depraved as this one. At the head of this rabble is Judas, one of the twelve chosen by Jesus to be His disciple, one who had for many years been intimately associated with our Lord, who had taught in His name and in His name had cast out devils, and yet betrayed Him without a scruple. I want to look at him briefly today before we proceed with the rest of the events that followed.

Judas Iscariot

It is easy to overlook the fact that Jesus chose Judas to be one of His disciples. We may also quickly forget that, while Judas betrayed Jesus, all the other disciples abandoned Him and fled. Like the other disciples, Judas shared a persistent misunderstanding about our Lord's mission on earth. When He kept talking about dying, they all felt varying degrees of anger, fear, and disappointment. None of them then understood why they had been chosen and carefully groomed if Jesus' mission was doomed to fail.

The exact motivation behind Judas's betrayal is unclear. What is clear is that Judas allowed his desires and his mind to place him in a position where Satan could manipulate him. He accepted payment to set Jesus up for the religious leaders. He identified Jesus for the guards with a kiss. It is possible that he was trying to force Jesus' hand, to make Him rebel against Rome and set up a new political government.

Whatever his plan might have been, Judas quickly realised that he did not like the way things were turning out. He tried to undo or reverse the effects of his evil action by returning the money to the priests, but it was too late by then; the wheels of God's sovereign plan had been set in motion. How sad that Judas ended his life in despair, without ever experiencing the gift of reconciliation God could grant even to him through Jesus Christ.

Human feelings toward Judas have always been mixed. Some have fervently hated him for his betrayal. Others have pitied him for not realising what he was doing. A few have tried to make him a hero for his part in bringing our Lord's earthly mission to its close. Some have even gone so far as to question God's fairness in allowing one man to bear such guilt. While feelings about him may be diverse, there are some facts to consider as well.

He, by his own choice, betrayed God's Son — for that matter, God Himself (Luke 22:48). He was a thief (John 12:6). Jesus knew that Judas's life of evil would not change; his betrayal of Jesus was part of God's sovereign plan (Psalm 41:9; Zechariah 11:12-13; Matthew 20:18; 26:20-25; Acts 1:16-20). But one fact runs through all of this: in betraying Jesus, Judas made the greatest mistake in history. Jesus knew what Judas was planning. He is, after all, God Himself.

But none of this meant that Judas was a puppet of God's will. Judas exercised his own choice, just as God allows each one of us to exercise our own choices at every juncture in our lives. The question before us, therefore, is: do we seek God's will when we do that, or do we arrogantly depend upon our own wisdom? A critical factor we are called upon to learn from Judas's actions is that he did not lose his relationship with Jesus; rather, he never found Jesus in the first place. Friends, let us examine ourselves and see where we stand on this subject today. Have we found

Jesus yet? Do we have that intimate, personal relationship with Him which will guide all our decisions?

This should make us think again about our own commitment to Jesus and the presence of His Spirit within us. Are we true disciples and followers, or uncommitted or half-committed pretenders? We can choose despair and death as the wages of sin, or we can choose repentance, forgiveness, hope, and eternal life. My friends, just as it was for Judas, the choice is ours: will we accept Jesus as our Master and Saviour, or, like Judas, betray Him at the first opportunity we get?

Our choice will depend on who occupies our mind and heart, Jesus or Satan.

Jesus before the Sanhedrin

Our Lord’s trial by the Sanhedrin had two phases. A small group met on the night of Thursday (John 18:12-24), and then the full Sanhedrin, traditionally reckoned at seventy-one of Israel’s religious leaders, met at daybreak on Friday (Luke 22:66-71). We know that, while the Romans controlled Israel politically, the Jews were given some authority over religious matters and minor civil disputes. The main charge against Jesus was religious in nature, such as calling Himself the Son of God, which according to their law was blasphemy.

The four Gospels do not agree in every particular about where exactly this trial took place. Matthew, Mark, and Luke broadly agree that Jesus was brought before the Sanhedrin; Matthew tells us plainly that the council had assembled at the house of Caiaphas the high priest, which suggests, though none of the Gospels states it outright, that the whole proceeding was held there. By this stage it must have been very late into the night, since the disciples had already shared the Passover meal with Jesus and spent further time with Him in prayer at Gethsemane before His arrest.

According to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, the Sanhedrin wished to condemn Jesus to death, but found the lack of evidence against Him an obstacle. Both Mark and Matthew state that many false witnesses made statements to the Sanhedrin; however, the witnesses did not agree with each other, and because of these inconsistencies and unsustainable hearsay evidence, the Sanhedrin was unable to condemn Him. The statements of these suborned witnesses included the claim that Jesus had said He would destroy the man-made temple and rebuild it in three days (Mark 14:58). Jesus did prophesy that the destruction of the Temple would occur, but never claimed that He would do it (John 2:19). According to the traditional Christian interpretation, Jesus was referring to His own body as “the temple” — He was referring to His death on the Cross and His resurrection three days later. Whether this twisting of His words was deliberate or a misunderstanding, we have no way of determining.

The fact remains that the trial was not fair, and was driven by mob frenzy instigated by the high priests. Later we will see that the choice of Barabbas over Jesus for release was also the result of the same mob frenzy, a mob blindly loyal to the Jewish leaders.

The question that comes to mind is: have things changed in our own times, with well-structured judiciaries and law-enforcement mechanisms in place? Are our electronic media, especially the television channels, always unbiased and fair? Do we not still quite often hear the shout, “Crucify him, crucify him” (cf. Matthew 27:22-23; Mark 15:13-14; Luke 23:21; John 19:6)? I am sure most present here would have wished, just as I have often wished, when reading about our Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospels, that we would have received Him and treated Him well had He walked the earth in our own times. But this is one time when, as I read about His arrest and trial, I feel glad that it all happened two thousand years ago. Imagine what the “breaking news” would have been. Imagine how some of today’s small-time, immature, camera-ready TV journalists would have enthusiastically tried Him and convicted Him.

His trial before Pilate we will examine next week, when we begin with chapter 15. However, before we leave this topic, let us quickly look at a table showing how the four Gospels report it, for our ready reference:

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Led away to Caiaphas, where the scribes	Led away to Caiaphas, where the chief priests,	Led away to the high priest’s	Taken first to Annas, Caiaphas’s

and elders had gathered. (Matthew 26:57)	elders, and scribes had gathered. (Mark 14:53)	house. (Luke 22:54)	father-in-law. (John 18:13)
Peter follows at a distance as far as the high priest's courtyard. (Matthew 26:58)	Peter follows at a distance into the courtyard. (Mark 14:54)	Peter follows at a distance. (Luke 22:54)	Peter, together with another disciple, follows Jesus in. (John 18:15)
False witnesses come forward but disagree; the high priest presses Jesus, who affirms He is the Christ; the council condemns Him and He is struck and mocked. (Matthew 26:59-68)	The same pattern of disagreeing false witnesses, Jesus' affirmation, condemnation, and mockery follows. (Mark 14:55-65)		

Peter's Denial

Peter was a person who was always ready to talk and ready to act right away, sometimes before it was time. He had a tendency to rash speech and hasty action; yet he was actually a very intelligent person, one with a tremendous amount of native ability — a person whom Jesus chose as one of the leaders of His Church. Incidentally, in the three places in the New Testament where the twelve apostles are all listed, we find Peter listed first. We also find Peter present when important events in our Lord's earthly life occurred: he was present when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead (Mark 5:37); he was present at the Transfiguration; and he was one of the three taken a little deeper into the garden when Jesus went to pray after the Last Supper. We also read of Peter's denial of Christ in all four Gospels. Let us look at the comparative chart on this portion, to refresh our memories:

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Denies knowing Jesus when a servant girl points him out. (Matthew 26:69-70)	Denies it when a servant girl identifies him. (Mark 14:66-68)	Denies it when a servant girl identifies him. (Luke 22:56-57)	Denies it when the girl on duty at the gate questions him. (John 18:17)
Denies it a second time before another bystander. (Matthew 26:71-72)	Denies it a second time before another bystander. (Mark 14:69-70)	Denies it a second time, this time challenged by a man. (Luke 22:58)	Denies it a second time before a group standing nearby. (John 18:25)
Denies it a third time before the surrounding crowd. (Matthew 26:73-74)	Denies it a third time before the surrounding crowd. (Mark 14:70-71)	Denies it a third time, challenged again by another man. (Luke 22:59-60)	Denies it a third time, this time challenged by a relative of the man whose ear he had cut off. (John 18:26-27)
The cock crows. (Matthew 26:74)	The cock crows a second time. (Mark 14:72)	The cock crows. (Luke 22:60)	The cock crows. (John 18:27)
		Jesus looks at Peter. (Luke 22:61)	
Peter leaves the palace and weeps. (Matthew 26:75)	Peter weeps. (Mark 14:72)	Peter leaves the palace and weeps. (Luke 22:62)	

The subject of Peter denying Jesus comes up frequently in Christian conversation, sermons, and teaching. That is because the account of Peter's betrayal of Jesus is well documented in the Gospels, as we saw in the quick reference chart, and the incident provides lessons for today's believers.

Many have argued that Peter was a coward, and that when danger stared him in the face he vehemently denied even knowing Jesus. But was he really a coward? While Mark's account does not mention names, John's account clearly states that it was Peter who struck the ear off the servant of the high priest at the time Jesus was arrested (John 18:10). John must be correct, as we know that Peter could easily be provoked to act like that; maybe he had meant to strike off the servant's head, but the servant ducked in time and lost only his ear. Peter did not run away like the others until it was too late, but stood his ground — he was ready for a fight against a large number of opponents. We also see that, unlike the other disciples, Peter followed the crowd that took Jesus away to be tried, and lingered just outside the courthouse. None of this represents cowardly behaviour.

Yet, strangely enough, he denied any relationship with Jesus three times, to a servant girl. In the space of a few hours, the courageous spokesman who had promised Jesus he would go to prison and death with Him is reduced to denying any relationship with the man he had followed for three years. He is in the vicinity of the Master, still following Him "afar off" (Mark 14:54), but he has been compromised. He has been unfaithful to his closest friend and Master. Why he did that, and immediately regretted it, eludes any conceivable explanation.

But, my friends, the question before us is: why does the story of Peter's denial strike such a chord in us? Why are we able to relate so easily to Peter? The answer probably is that each of us has, in some way, been false to our personal relationship with Christ:

- By disassociating ourselves from our loyalty to Christ in the presence of loud-mouthed unbelievers or vocal critics — sometimes by open denial, but too often by our silence.
- By professing Jesus with our mouths, but excusing ourselves when we do things we know are contrary to His teachings. It is this kind of double life that gives unbelievers their "hypocrite" excuse.

The Holy Spirit within us is grieved; we feel guilty (so long as our conscience is not utterly hardened by repeated, flagrant sin); we are ashamed. When we are in this condition, we are out of fellowship with Jesus, and become subject to the enemy's pounding, and to beating ourselves up. If Satan cannot destroy our faith, he tries to destroy our fellowship with Jesus — just as he did in Peter's case — our joy, and our hope, so that we live in misery, become ineffective, and are neutralised so far as furthering the Kingdom of God, and are put to use in extending Satan's sphere of influence instead.

But then Jesus intervenes. In Peter's case, as soon as he finishes denying Jesus for the third time, Jesus turns and makes eye contact with Peter. Peter is struck by the knowledge that Jesus knows what he has done. Jesus is aware — Jesus, who has predicted this very lapse, knows. Immediately Peter's heart is gripped with inconsolable grief, and he goes out and weeps bitterly (Luke 22:62). This short scene in the high priest's courtyard offers a number of lessons for us.

1. We must remain humble, not boastful, for the line between courage and cowardice can be very thin. Paul cautions us, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).
2. Without the spiritual preparation of prayer, we are no match for the devil's grasping power. We must live in constant prayer, depending only on our Lord for strength.
3. Fear and faith cannot easily co-exist. When we begin to give in to our fears, we become subject to the deceiver, who would undermine our faith with his lies.
4. Jesus looks upon His believers when they fall into sin. And at that moment, we see in His eyes disappointment, rebuke, and love.

I have learned over the years that guilt can be a terrible taskmaster. But guilt itself cannot help us conquer sin. Guilt is the burglar alarm of our conscience, and while it can ring ceaselessly, it cannot heal.

Only the love of Jesus for us, and our love for Jesus, can heal us. A desire not to disappoint Him and let Him down is stronger than the fear of guilt. This is what the Apostle John meant when he said, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18).

As Jesus looks at Peter, Jesus sees afresh the necessity of the Cross that lies before Him. His depthless love determines to redeem from sin the Peters among His worldwide band of disciples — by forgiving our offences, taking our penalty, healing our sin-damaged souls, and restoring us to fellowship with God.

Let us pray:

Jesus our Master, we look at Peter and see ourselves. How we have failed You! How we have disappointed You! How we have grieved You — not just once, but again and again. Thank You for the precious Cross. Thank You for Your patience. Thank You for Your love for us and for the whole world. Amen.