

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Studies in John's Gospel: John 18

Around three years ago, we started to discuss the Gospel of John in these broadcasts, taking a block of four or five chapters at a time. Today we begin looking at the last four chapters of the Gospel. These cover the arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as well as His final appearances to His disciples.

I would like to start with a reminder that each of the four Gospels portrays a particular aspect of the Lord Jesus. In Matthew He is presented as King, in Mark as the Servant and in Luke as the Son of Man. Those three Gospels are sometimes referred to as the synoptic Gospels meaning that they present Jesus in a broadly similar way, if with a different emphasis in each. John's Gospel is different. Jesus is presented as the Son of God. Right from the very first verse, His divine origin is stated and the book is full of statements about His Person, many of which are not repeated in the other three Gospels. We shall see aspects of that in these last four chapters.

In chapters 13 to 17, Jesus spends much time with those who are described as "His own", telling them of great things which could only be told to those who belong to Him. Many of the words are spoken on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane and it is the arrival at the Garden with which chapter 18, our subject today, commences.

I would like to structure my talk around the four individuals with whom Jesus had most to do in chapter 18. There were other individuals and there were groups of people as well, but most attention is drawn to Judas the friend and betrayer, to Caiaphas the priest, to Peter the disciple and denier, and to Pilate the governor. At the same time, I want to try to draw attention to some of the ways in which John's theme of Jesus as the Son of God is brought out in this chapter. I won't have time to read the whole of the chapter but under each of our four headings I will read one or more verses, in all cases reading from the Authorised Version of the Bible.

So, to our first heading, Judas the friend and betrayer, which covers verses 1 to 12. Let me read verses 1 to 6: "When Jesus had spoken these words, he went forth with his disciples over the brook Cedron, where was a garden, into the which he entered, and his disciples. And Judas also, which betrayed him, knew the place: for Jesus oftentimes resorted thither with his disciples. Judas then, having received a band of men and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, cometh thither with lanterns and torches and weapons. Jesus therefore, knowing all things that should come upon him, went forth, and said unto them, Whom seek ye? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus saith unto them, I am he. And Judas also, which betrayed him, stood with them. As soon then as he had said unto them, I am he, they went backward, and fell to the ground."

John does not record the Lord's agony in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane but concentrates on the betrayal and arrest of Jesus. Judas is mentioned three times in these first twelve verses and in two of the instances it is added "which betrayed him." Here was a man who had journeyed with Jesus for three years, had seen for himself the miracles which Jesus had performed, had heard for himself the words which Jesus said and had witnessed for himself the love and grace which Jesus showed to those in need. And yet here Judas is, in cowardly fashion at night, leading a group of armed men to betray that same Jesus!

I feel that I must draw attention to the danger of someone mixing closely with Christians, hearing and perhaps knowing the words of the Bible, even acting like a Christian, and yet like Judas, not having that personal relationship with Jesus which is the only thing which makes a real Christian. Dear hearer, I hope that you are not like Judas, pretending and looking fine on the surface, but in reality not having trusted in Jesus as Saviour and Lord in a real way. What a warning Judas is!

Earlier, I referred to Judas as friend as well as betrayer. I have in mind the prophecy of Psalm 41:9 which reads: "Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me." We sometimes may forget what sadness it brought to Jesus to have this friend betray Him, someone who seemed close to Him and yet in the end sided with His enemies.

Now, to mention a few things in these first twelve verses in John 18 which continue the emphasis in this Gospel of Jesus as the Son of God. Firstly, in verse 4 it says that "Jesus therefore, knowing all things that should come upon

him, went forth". As Son of God, there was nothing of the horrifying events to come which Jesus did not know, yet still Jesus positively "went forth" to those who would arrest Him.

Then, in response to the arrestors' statement that the One whom they sought was Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus said, "I am." In the Authorised Version the words are recorded in verse 5 as "I am he" but that third word is not in the original and the statement should simply but profoundly be: "I am." Jesus had previously used this statement of Himself in John 8:58 when He said: "Before Abraham was, I am" thereby linking Himself with God, who told Moses to take the message into Egypt that "I AM hath sent me" – see Exodus 3:14. Jesus was stating to these men in the Garden that He was and is the eternal Son of God, equal with God. The impact of this statement on these men was dramatic – "they went backward, and fell to the ground" – see verse 6.

Jesus, as Son of God knew that He must go forward to the cross to finish the work which His Father had given Him to do – see 17:4. Peter did not have this divine perception and so tried to protect Jesus by using his sword to cut off the ear of Malchus, one of the high priest's servants, as recorded in verses 10 and 11 of our chapter. Naturally speaking, this seemed an applaudable action by Peter, but Jesus would not have anyone or anything interfere with His determination to go forward to Calvary.

The suggestion from verses 3 and 12 is that the company which came to arrest Jesus was of a reasonable size. Whatever their size and weaponry, we see from the power of the Son of God that, while they thought that they arrested and overcame Jesus, in fact they could have done nothing if He had not allowed them to do so!

We come now to the second main individual in this chapter, Caiaphas the priest. The account of Caiaphas is covered in verses 13-14 and 19-24. Let me read verse 14 and verses 19-21: "Now Caiaphas was he, which gave counsel to the Jews, that it was expedient that one man should die for the people ... The high priest then asked Jesus of his disciples, and of his doctrine. Jesus answered him, I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing. Why askest thou me? ask them which heard me, what I have said unto them: behold, they know what I said".

It seems that when the Romans conquered a particular territory they would tolerate the continuance of local religions as long as these did not pose a threat to the Roman rule. The Romans preferred to have in place as religious leader a local person of their choice and this is how Caiaphas achieved office as high priest. There was no Old Testament basis for this appointment. In effect he was a political choice for a religious position.

From being arrested and bound in Gethsemane, Jesus is taken via Annas to his son in law, Caiaphas. Caiaphas questions Jesus about His disciples and His doctrine. Jesus does not say anything about His disciples, continuing to protect them. Of His doctrine, Jesus told Caiaphas that He had always spoken openly, including in the Jewish synagogue and temple, to the many who had heard Him. Caiaphas should enquire of them to determine what Jesus had said of His doctrine and whether there was anything of evil in it.

In John 11:47-53, following Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, the chief priests and Pharisees met to discuss their concern that more and more people would follow Jesus because of His many miracles. This would cause concern to the Romans who could then take action to remove the religion and identity of the Jews. At that meeting, Caiaphas said that it would be better for the Jews if one person, Jesus, were killed rather than the whole Jewish people be put at risk. Little did Caiaphas realise that he was uttering words which were in God's purpose for blessing for all nations through the death of Jesus.

Taking those verses in John 11 with these in chapter 18, it seems clear that Caiaphas had decided in advance that Jesus needed to die. The Romans did not allow the Jews to implement the death sentence and to get rid of Jesus, the Jews therefore needed Pilate to pronounce that sentence. In this meeting with Jesus recorded in chapter 18, Caiaphas was looking for any pretext which would allow him to present to the Roman Governor a case for Jesus being put to death. We know from reading the other Gospels that the religious leaders of the Jews tried hard to find witnesses, true or false, who would be willing to allege that Jesus had made public statements which were evil. Jesus, Son of God, could see right into the mind of Caiaphas and knew exactly what that scheming man was trying to achieve.

I believe that Caiaphas is a warning to us that to be a Christian leader, even by political appointment, does not of itself mean that that leader is a born again Christian. Essentially, Caiaphas was no better than Judas, despite his title of high priest and his religious trappings. For every person of whatever religious standing, the Bible teaches that it is essential to have a personal relationship with Jesus, based on His death on the cross for the sins of everyone, including religious leaders.

Now we turn to the third individual in this chapter, Peter the disciple and denier. The verses we need to look at are 15-18 and 25-27. Verses 15 and 16 tell us that the disciples, Peter and John, followed Jesus after His arrest but at a

distance. John was able to gain access for himself and Peter to the high priest's residence. We pick up the reading from verse 17: "Then saith the damsel that kept the door unto Peter, Art not thou also one of this man's disciples? He saith, I am not. And the servants and officers stood there, who had made a fire of coals; for it was cold: and they warmed themselves: and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself." And now to verse 25: "And Simon Peter stood and warmed himself. They said therefore unto him, Art not thou also one of his disciples? He denied it, and said, I am not. One of the servants of the high priest, being his kinsman whose ear Peter cut off, saith, Did not I see thee in the garden with him? Peter then denied again: and immediately the cock crew."

These verses tell us of the sad event of Peter three times denying Jesus. In each of the other three Gospels there is a record of Jesus telling Peter that shortly he would deny the Lord, for example in Matthew 26:34. As Son of God, Jesus knew everything and it is no surprise then that we read in these verses of the fulfilment of the Lord's prediction.

There are lessons in this for us. At a time of difficulty in following the Lord, Peter was in the wrong place with the wrong people. Spiritually speaking, he was trying to get help from people who couldn't help him, because they were not followers of Jesus and at a fire which may have been physically warm but which did nothing to warm him spiritually. And so he got into deep water when questioned by non-believers about his relationship with Jesus. He should have been with the other disciples.

Can you relate to any of this? I can. Sometimes in my Christian life when all has not been well, instead of getting back to the Word of God, to prayer and to other believers, I haven't and a poor situation has got worse.

There is another, perhaps less obvious, lesson. John was in broadly the same situation as Peter. In fact it was John who gained access for Peter to the high priest's residence. It seems that John could withstand the pressures of that place whereas Peter couldn't. As Christians we differ in what can cause us to fail. Satan is well aware of the weaknesses of each of us and he may tempt me with things which differ from those with which he tempts you. Let us try to be careful, particularly with Christians who may be under pressure or who have not belonged to the Lord for very long, not to put them into situations which could cause them to stumble.

I have to say that I can relate to Peter. He acted first, then thought about it. He was impulsive. He took a long time to realise that his own strength wasn't good enough and that he had to see things spiritually and not just naturally. But, to use an expression, his heart was in the right place. Peter was a disciple and the word disciple means learner. Peter did learn and when we come to the Acts of the Apostles we see what a tremendous servant of God Peter becomes, after his failings recorded in the Gospels and his interview with the Lord recorded in John 21. There three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me", just as three times in today's chapter Peter denied the Lord. The Son of God sees the potential in those who belong to Him and that potential can be realised if our relationship with Him is right.

Lastly, we come to Pilate the governor, from verse 28 to the end of the chapter. I can't think of anyone in the Bible worse than Pilate for trying to please everybody, for realising the reality but refusing to face up to it, for hiding behind clever words, for trying to get rid of personal responsibility by attempting to pass it on to somebody else. I certainly wouldn't want my destiny to be in the hands of someone like Pilate! But he was an ideal man for the Jews to use to progress this travesty of a trial of Jesus. In the ways of God's wonderful plan of salvation, Jesus had to die, innocent though He was.

Let me read verse 28: "Then led they Jesus from Caiaphas unto the hall of judgment: and it was early; and they themselves went not into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the passover."

This verse underlines the sheer hypocrisy of the religious leaders of the day. They were concerned to keep the formal rituals to stay clean, but were quite happy to resort to lies and deceit to get rid of Jesus. Everyone who calls himself a Christian should be careful to ensure that he is a real believer in Jesus and not hide behind a lot of procedures which are mere ritual.

The thrust of Pilate's initial questioning of Jesus in verses 33-36 was to ascertain whether Jesus was looking to establish Himself as a King of the Jewish nation and therefore be a rival to Caesar.

Verse 36 contains the answer of Jesus to this accusation: "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence." Jesus had already told His listeners some time earlier: "Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world" – John 8:23. Jesus, the Son of God, was from heaven and therefore His kingdom was heavenly and was spiritual in nature. It would not be established by man's weapons of war but is established by God's decree and the Bible teaches that God will evidence this to the world in a future day when Jesus will be seen as King of kings, and Lord of lords – Revelation 19:16. So, once again John's emphasis on the divine nature of Jesus is seen in our chapter.

The message of a section of the Bible can sometimes be determined by noting the frequency of occurrence of a word or a phrase. For example, a typical phrase in John's Gospel is "I am", stating the divine attributes of the Son of God. If you have a Bible concordance, look up the word "truth" and you will see that, while it scarcely appears in the first three Gospels, it occurs many times in John's Gospel. Nothing in the Bible is there by coincidence and I suggest that the Holy Spirit is here drawing attention to the fact that the Son of God is the very embodiment of truth. Perhaps the best known example in John is 14:6 where Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth, and the life..."

In verses 37 and 38 of our chapter this matter of truth is raised. There Jesus said that He came "into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." Pilate typically avoided the issue by asking the philosophical question "What is truth?" and then walking away from the One who was truth personified.

Pilate walked away from Jesus and went outside to the Jews with his verdict: "I find in him no fault at all". This seems a final judgment from the governor; however it was followed by a "but" when, in the final two verses of our chapter, Pilate tried to pass the buck by leaving the final choice to the people as to whether Jesus should be released. Their choice was between Jesus and Barabbas. Instead of the Son of God the people chose Barabbas. The chapter closes with the salutary comment on that choice: "Now Barabbas was a robber".

As with the other individuals we have considered in this chapter, Pilate is a warning to us. He would not stand up for what he knew to be right because it could cause him difficulties. He hid behind clever questions such as, "What is truth?". He tried to pass on the ultimate responsibility for the death of an innocent Jesus to others. Dear hearers, let us be absolutely clear that the Bible teaches that each of us personally will have to answer to God as to what we think of Jesus. There will be no wriggling out of it by using clever words or walking away or blaming others!

While these four individuals all disappointed to a greater or lesser extent, I want to end this talk by pointing to the central Person in this chapter, Jesus, the Son of God. He never disappointed. He lived a perfect life. He was faithful to God in being determined to go on to Calvary. And yet, as we shall see, God willing, when we look at chapter 19, Jesus is "the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" – Galatians 2:20.

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