

THE WAY TO THE CROSS

by Ray C. Stedman

You cannot read Chapters 18 and 19 of the Gospel of John, which cover the trial, crucifixion and burial of the Lord Jesus, without noting that these are very carefully selected events which John records. He leaves out many of the incidents the other gospels include, while supplying details they leave out. Chapter 18, which opens with the arrest of Jesus and ends just prior to the scourging by the Roman soldiers at the command of Pilate after the Lord's first appearance before him, encompasses three major movements of events. We will not be covering the familiar stories of what happened to Jesus, but rather the emphasis that John gives to the specific events which he has selected. He is obviously aiming at creating a certain impression, and this is what we want to focus upon.

The first account is the story of the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane:

When Jesus had spoken these words [i.e., the words of his prayer], he went forth with his disciples across the Kidron valley, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas, procuring a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to befall him, came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" They answered him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When he said to them, "I am he," they drew back and fell on the ground. Again he asked them, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he; so, if you seek me, let these men go." This was to fulfill the word which he had spoken, "Of those whom thou gavest me I lost not one." Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's slave and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?" {John 18:1-11 RSV}

Perhaps the most striking feature of that account is the event which John does not record -- the agony of Jesus in the shadows of the garden. Each of the other three gospels relates this incident when Jesus took Peter, James and John and asked them to pray with him. Then, retiring further into the garden, he knelt and cried out to his Father, asking that if possible the cup might pass from him. But John says nothing of the loud cries, the tears, the bloody sweat that fell from his brow, his three-fold prayer, and his strengthening by the angel who appeared to him at the end of his ordeal.

The reason John does not mention these incidents is because they reveal Jesus in his human weakness and his recognition that he was about to be put through a terrible ordeal. His response to that was to cry out in pain and fear, out of which God delivered him and strengthened him. What John actually records is the picture of the Lord after that event, striding out in dignity and majesty, in full command of what is happening. This is what John wants us to see, especially as he relates to these two men, Judas and Peter. He draws a contrast in each of these movements of this chapter and here the contrast is between Judas and Peter.

John says that Jesus met the crowd of soldiers and Pharisees who were coming to arrest him, and immediately identified himself. "Whom do you seek?" he asked. They replied, "Jesus of Nazareth." He said, "I am he." By his aggressive initiative, he anticipates and renders quite unnecessary the betraying kiss of Judas, which the other accounts tell us Judas had arranged as a signal for the soldiers as to which one to arrest. Judas did kiss him, but it was an action that had little or no meaning for Jesus as, according to this account, he had twice clearly told them who he was.

The impressive thing about it is that, when he did this, so commanding was his initiative and so unexpected was his action that the soldiers and priests stumbled backwards and fell all over one another. They must have

felt like fools before the impressive calm and dignity of Jesus. Some commentators say that he said this in such a striking way that what he was actually saying was the name of God, "I AM," and there may even have been some kind of dramatic revelation of his deity that caused the soldiers to fall backwards. I do not think so. To me that smacks of Star Wars or Flash Gordon. What caused the arresting parties to fall to the ground was simply the unexpectedness of his identification and his aggressive approach.

This also renders quite ridiculous the number of people whom Judas had brought with him. The "band of soldiers" which John refers to is a word that means "cohort," which is a tenth of a legion: 500 soldiers. Most commentators agree that there probably were not that many in this group -- obviously 500 soldiers would not be required to arrest a man -- but it probably refers to a considerable number, perhaps 15 or 20, who were part of the band of Roman soldiers. With them were a number of the temple guards, "officers from the temple," and included also were a scattering of Pharisees and Sadducees, those of the high priest's office. All of them were carrying lanterns and torches and were armed to the teeth. So probably a minimum of 50 people came to take one lone, unarmed teacher, defended by eleven very frightened fishermen who had but two swords between them.

John is trying to picture the ridiculous contrast between the expectations of these soldiers and the dignity and majesty with which our Lord conducted himself. Part of that is conveyed by the fact that, when Jesus gives orders, the soldiers obey him. He said, "If you are looking for me, then let these men go." Though John does not say so, it is clear that the disciples took full advantage of that and fled as fast as they could. Peter, of course, could not leave. He had crawled out on a limb earlier by saying he would defend Jesus to the death. He drew his sword and aimed a blow at the head of the high priest's servant, but the man ducked, and ended up having his ear lopped off. (We can tell John was an eyewitness because he says it was the man's right ear.) By his impetuous action Peter is made to look like a fool. Jesus rebukes him, tells him to put his sword away, and indicates that he is totally out of line in his actions.

John intends to draw a sharp contrast between Judas and Peter. Twice in these verses he refers to Judas as the one "who betrayed him." Verse 2: "Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place." Judas is cool and calculating, having thought it all out in advance. Evidently he sensed something of the power of Jesus because he comes with this tremendous crowd of 50 or more people to arrest a single man. Then, in Verse 5, John says, "Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them." By this time it was too late to do anything for Judas. He had gone beyond the point of no return. Soon he would be in a suicide's grave, his soul gone out into the eternal night.

But observe Peter. He looks foolish and does a rather stupid thing. Jesus, however, remedies his mistake. He picked up the cut-off ear and, according to the other accounts, placed it back on the man's head and healed it with a touch, thereby saving Peter from an awful lot of difficulty later.

Have you ever lopped off somebody's ear, hoping to do some good for the Lord? I confess there have been times when I have found myself doing that. What a wonderful encouragement that He can heal the cut-off ear!

Then he corrected Peter's method, as he sometimes has to do with us, too. He said, "Put up your sword, Peter. That is not the way I work. I am not here to destroy, to cut people apart." By his word he prevented any more cut-off ears.

Then our Lord modeled for Peter the true way to conquer the hearts of men: "Shall I not drink the cup which my Father has given me?" That was not a pleasant cup. It meant agony and torment, pain and loneliness in the horror of the cross. Yet what made it helpful was that it was the Father's choice. Have we learned that lesson yet? God sometimes chooses hard things for us. There is a distressing idea about Christianity abroad today which says that when you become a Christian, God works for you to keep everything smooth and easy. But the cross is the answer to that. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "We are afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed," {cf, 2 Cor 4:9}. That is true Christianity, and that is what our Lord manifested here. Peter learned his lesson.

By the way, notice that, all through this account, Peter is referred to as "Simon Peter." Wherever the Holy Spirit chooses to use that name, Peter is always acting in the flesh, moving in his own strength, and trying to

do things his own way. But Peter learned great lessons from this incident. Years later, thinking back on these very events, he wrote of Jesus, "When he was reviled he reviled not again, but committed himself to Him who judges all things justly," {cf, 1 Pet 2:23}. Trust God. He is part of the program. He has a plan to work this out. It may be through pain and anguish, but the result is certain.

John now summarizes the trials before the Jewish priests.

So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews seized Jesus and bound him. First they led him to Annas; for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had given counsel to the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.

Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. As this disciple was known to the high priest, he entered the court of the high priest along with Jesus, while Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the maid who kept the door, and brought Peter in. The maid who kept the door said to Peter, "Are not you also one of this man's disciples?" He said, "I am not." 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. {John 18:12-18 RSV}

It is not the trial before the high priest that occupies John's attention here, but the actions of Peter. He is resentful and hurt by the rebuke of Jesus, confused that his zealous, well-intentioned efforts to do something to save his Lord fell apart. The other accounts say he "followed afar off" {Luke 22:54 KJV}, and he arrived after the other disciple. That was probably John, though we cannot be certain. It may have been his brother James. These two were fishermen who had a business that often took them to Jerusalem, selling the salted fish from the Sea of Galilee. Through that they had doubtless become acquainted with the high priest and his family. (John even knew the name of the priest's servant whose ear Peter cut off.)

But the striking thing about this account is that, when John came out and asked the maid to let Peter in, she asked Peter, "Are you one of this man's disciples?" He had no reason at all to deny that. At that point he was in no danger. John was also a disciple, and through this whole account he had never been harassed. Yet the maid knew that Peter was a disciple. Notice how she phrased her question to him, "Are not you also one of this man's disciples?" It is ironic to know that, had Peter said, "Yes, I am," he could have joined the other disciple, seen the whole proceedings, and never would have denied his Lord. But Peter foolishly determined to do it his way. That is what got him into trouble.

He believed like the little boy who said about a lie, "A lie is an abomination to the Lord, but a very present help in time of trouble!" Many of us agree with that philosophy. Have you discovered that, once you tell one lie, you cannot stop? Other circumstances force you to tell another to back up the first one. Then, like Peter, you find yourself riding an avalanche that sweeps you away.

That is what happened here. A lie completely swept Peter into the most disastrous experience of his life.

In contrast, John describes Jesus' behavior before the high priest:

The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. 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 secretly. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me, what I said to them; they know what I said." When he had said this, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. {John 18:19-24 RSV}

As John is careful to point out, Annas was not really the high priest, but the father-in-law of the high priest. He had been the high priest some years before this, but, because of his corruption, he had been removed from

office by the Romans. Now he was the "power behind the throne," as it were, and the soldiers brought Jesus to him for a kind of preliminary hearing.

Annas begins this interrogation on a totally illegal basis. Like American law, Jewish law never required anybody to testify against himself, yet that was what Annas did with Jesus. The point John is making is that Peter was asked a fair and simple question, one that did not jeopardize him in the least, yet he answered with lies and pretense. But, when Jesus was asked devious and illegal questions, he replied openly and honestly, only to be met by contempt and by a stinging blow to the face.

Our Lord's response is very interesting, especially in light of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also," {Matt 5:39 RSV}. Does that mean that we are to meekly let people do whatever they want with us? Some have interpreted it that way. But this account in John explains what Jesus meant. He did not literally turn the other cheek, but figuratively he did: He simply repeated his previous position which had brought on the unwarranted slap on the cheek. When Annas began to question him, what he had said, in effect, was, "This is not right. The law does not allow you to question me. Besides, it is not necessary. Ask those who heard me. They can tell you. Bring witnesses. That is what the law requires." When the minion of the high priest, no doubt in an attempt to endear himself to his master, strikes him a stinging blow, Jesus does the same thing, saying to the man, "If I have done wrong then tell me what it is. If not, why do you hit me? That is against the law." He simply repeats the position he had taken earlier and stands his ground, without retaliation or personal abuse. That is what it means to turn the other cheek: Stand on your rights but without becoming angry or striking back. What a beautiful model this is.

Evidently when Annas saw that, he realized he could get nowhere, so he sent Jesus on to Caiaphas. He did not have to send him far, just across the courtyard to the hall of the high priest, where, by this time, the Sanhedrin had gathered. But John ignores that whole trial before the high priest (we get that in other gospels) and instead relates what Peter does:

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. [That is where we left him.] They said to him, "Are not you also one of his disciples?" He denied it and said, "I am not." One of the servants of the high priest, a kinsman of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Peter again denied it; and at once the cock crowed. {John 18:25-27 RSV}

That is a highly condensed account that probably covers a period of an hour or more. As he was standing around the fire warming himself with the soldiers, Peter's Galilean accent betrayed him. He sounded like a Texan in Boston! Everybody knew instantly where he came from. According to the other accounts, he had to deny two or three times that he was a disciple of Jesus because he sounded like one. By this time he was becoming frustrated; he could not back away from his lie. About an hour later, one of the servants, the man who was a relative of the one whose ear had been chopped off, saw him and asked him again, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" By now Peter is so rattled and frustrated, according to the other accounts, this is when he denied the Lord with oaths and curses, finally resorting to blasphemy in order to assert his lie that he was not a disciple of the Lord. The minute he did, through the morning air there came the sound of a rooster crowing. Peter remembered what Jesus had said, and, according to the other accounts, at that very moment Jesus walked across the courtyard and caught his eye. When Peter saw those eyes filled with mercy and tender love, he broke down and wept. Quickly leaving the area he went out and wept bitterly in the streets of Jerusalem.

John now turns to the account of Jesus before Pilate.

Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the praetorium. It was early. [Probably 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning.] They themselves did not enter the praetorium, so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the passover. {John 18:28 RSV}

This has confused many because the passover actually had been eaten the night before. But what this refers to is the Feast of Unleavened Bread which accompanied the passover, and for which it was necessary to keep oneself undefiled from leaven. This is why the Jews were concerned. They did not want to enter the place of a

Gentile lest they should touch leaven in some way and thus be defiled. John draws a clear contrast between their sanctimonious piousness over ceremonial defilement when they were totally unconcerned about the moral guilt of delivering an innocent man up to die.

So Pilate went out to them, and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered him, "If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have handed him over." Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death." This was to fulfill the word which Jesus had spoken to show by what death he was to die. {John 18:29-32 RSV}

The Jews, of course, want Pilate to simply affirm their sentence and carry it out without any further hearing. Pilate refuses. He does not like these Jews -- he never did. To exasperate them, he throws it back at them: "Take him yourselves and crucify him." John says God used that to bring about what had been predicted 1,000 years before, that when Jesus died it would not be by the Jewish method of stoning but by the Roman method of crucifixion. Psalm 22 describes it very clearly. John is saying that God is still in control of all these events, and working his will despite the free will of man and the right of men to make their own choices.

Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?" {John 18:33-35 RSV}

That exchange followed Pilate's direct question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" The emphasis was on the word "you." "Are you the King of the Jews?" By now Pilate's curiosity is aroused. He looks at Jesus and wonders what is behind all this. Jesus could not answer by a simple "Yes" or "No." If he had said "No," Pilate would have imagined that he was not a king at all. If he had said "Yes," Pilate would have thought he was a king according to the Jewish standards and that he was a threat to Caesar. So Jesus said to him, "How are you asking that question? Are you asking it as a Jew or as a Roman?" Pilate's response is, "Do I look like a Jew? Am I a Jew? Your own people delivered you to me. What is going on?"

Jesus answers the question directly.

Jesus answered, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." {John 18:36-37 RSV}

This was Pilate's critical moment. What Jesus says is, "Yes, I am a king" (Pilate understood that), "but my kingship is not of this world. It is not the kind you think. But I am a king. You have said the truth." That is what he means when he says, "You say that I am a king. You have said the truth. I was born a king. The work of a king is to make people face the way things really are, to unveil the truth. Therefore, everyone who loves truth will listen to me." That was Pilate's cue. It was the test of whether he truly loved the truth.

Here is his response.

Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" {John 18:38a RSV}

It is a cynical, weary answer, the response of someone who has been trying to find a way out of his troubles, but has lost all confidence in religion or any other guide.

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again, and told them, "I find no crime in him." {John 18:38b RSV}

That was a sentence of acquittal. Had Pilate been the man of truth that Jesus was probing him to discover, he would have dismissed the charges and let Jesus go. But, unfortunately, he was a politician. Thus we get the

next word:

"But [that is the politician's word] you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover; will you have me release for you the King of the Jews?" They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber. {John 18:39-40 RSV}

We would call him a terrorist, a troublemaker who had caused violence throughout Jerusalem. John is quickly covering a lot of events here. According to the other gospels, at this point a message arrived from Pilate's wife warning him, "Have nothing to do with that just man. I have suffered many things in a dream about him," {cf, Matt 27:19 KJV}. That got to Pilate's superstitious mind. As a result he sent Jesus to King Herod from Galilee. Herod tried to question Jesus, but Jesus would not answer him, so the king sent him back to Pilate. In a desperate attempt to still pronounce Jesus innocent, but to find some way to deliver him without having to take a stand himself, Pilate now did a terrible thing, which John records in the first three verses of Chapter 19:

Then Pilate took Jesus and scourged him. And the soldiers plaited a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and arrayed him in a purple robe; they came up to him saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. {John 19:1-3 RSV}

Now begins the physical torment of our Lord, predicted in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, "The chastisement of our peace was laid upon him and by his stripes we are healed," {cf, Isa 53:5 RSV}. The terrible Roman scourging -- pieces of metal and bone were embedded in the leather whips -- stripped all the skin off his back, leaving him bloody and torn; a crown of thorns was pressed upon his head, and the soldiers mocked and taunted him.

It is clear from this account that human free will operates always within the framework of divine determination. God gives us choices -- and they are real choices -- but he does not give us all the choices. Nobody can control his or her own life. While we are always responsible for the choices we make, ultimately they fit within the plan and program that God is working out.

Notice that neither Pilate's conscience nor Peter's zeal could stand up against the subtle pressure of the world, the flesh and the devil. Neither can ours. Both Roman pride and Galilean courage crumbled when they were exposed to the subtle temptations and pressures of the world. If we choose those things we must suffer the result of our own folly.

Pilate chose compromise and ended up a murderer of an innocent man. The crowd chose Barabbas and ended up crucifying the Son of God. Jesus chose the cross and ended up King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Thrust upon us in this account is the realization that there is no point in trying to outwit God. He will work out his own purposes, but we will have to bear the results of our own folly.

The truth of this account is best summed up in the words of James Russell Lowell,

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne.
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown
Standeth God among the shadows,
Keeping watch above His own.

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