

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TEMPTED TO DENY YOU ARE A DISCIPLE OF JESUS?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

Mohammed Ismail, 21, was arrested by the Egyptian police in October 1990 and joined two friends who had been arrested eleven days earlier. The three Moslem youths had heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and had accepted Jesus as their Savior. They had been sharing the love of Christ at a youth meeting. While in prison, according to an Egyptian human rights organization, they were tortured with electric shocks, beaten, and threatened with rape. At their trial in November 1990 they were declared innocent by the courts and released, but they were arrested again by the secret police and charged with contempt of Islam and threatening the unity of the country. Other charges were drummed up for which there was a possible ten-year sentence.

While in jail, Ismail's two friends confessed their crimes under duress; however, Ismail is reported to have said, "I will never deny Christ." Then he was sent to a special wing of the prison called the Tribulation Sector. His lawyer states that he was deprived of food and sleep and confined to a dark, severely cramped cell, where he finally recanted his faith in Christ. According to News Network International, it is difficult to prove that the government always tries to force Christians to revert to Islam or recant their Christianity, but after ten months in prison, the three were released in July 1991--as professing Moslems (*Christianity Today*, July 20, 1992, p. 35).

Have you ever been tempted to deny that you are a disciple of Jesus? Perhaps you have found yourself in situations where it seemed better for your health if you just kept quiet or even recanted your relationship to Christ. Well, beginning with Peter, who gave in to the temptation to deny Jesus as his Lord and Messiah at Jesus' trial, the disciples of Jesus Christ over the centuries have indeed been tempted to deny him. The circumstances vary from the extreme of being tortured in prison to the daily pressure to deny Christ over lunch with a fellow worker because of the fear of rejection. The temptation to deny Jesus sits outside the heart of each one of us looking for an opportunity to be invited in. Jesus clearly understood this temptation, for he warned his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, "Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation [to deny Me]; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41).

The fire of temptation was first lit by (1) the boastful pride of Peter and the other disciples who bragged that they would never leave or forsake Jesus, but would willingly go to prison and die with him. Fuel was added to the flame when (2) Satan entered Judas, and he walked out of the upper room into the night determined to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Now as we turn to Luke 22:47-62 we will find that (3) Judas added more fuel to the fire of temptation for the disciples when he arrived at the garden of Gethsemane with the power of darkness behind him in the form of the Sanhedrin and a Roman cohort.

The Judas kiss of betrayal

While He was still speaking, behold, a multitude came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was preceding them; and he approached Jesus to kiss Him. But Jesus said to him, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" And when those who were around Him saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, shall we strike with the sword?" And a certain one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus answered and said, "Stop! No more of this." And He touched his ear and healed him. And Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders who had come against Him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as against a robber? While I was with you daily in the temple, you did not lay hands on Me; but this hour and the power of darkness are yours."

(Luke 22:47-53)

In Matthew 26:39, the Lord had prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt." Then he had arisen, awakened his disciples, and warned them for the second time to keep watching and praying that they might not enter into temptation. From where he had stood in the garden on the side of the Mount of Olives, he could look down on the temple and the bridge that spanned the Kidron valley from the Beautiful Gate to the foot of the mountain. On that spiritually and physically dark night he had seen a multitude of people coming across the bridge toward the garden carrying torches and lanterns, and said, "Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!" (26:45-46).

Remember, it was Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was to be celebrated over a seven-day period. According to ancient records there were some 2,700,000 Jews celebrating in Jerusalem and the surrounding villages. The religious leadership could not afford to have a riot in the temple when Jesus was teaching for fear of the iron fist of the Roman army. So there was great political wisdom in the Sanhedrin's decision to send not only the temple police, but also a whole or part of a Roman cohort, the high priest, and the rulers to arrest Jesus. They wanted to nail Jesus to a cross, and they planned on arriving in his presence with a very large hammer. So a fully equipped "SWAT team" walked up the mountain that night to arrest Jesus, and Judas was at the head of the parade.

In John 18:2-12, we find that the chief priests had authorized Judas to lead a Roman cohort made up of six hundred men and officers to the garden. When they arrived at the garden, Jesus walked toward the chief priests--the professed ministers of God, guardians of his temple, and upholders of his sanctity and truth--who were surrounded by the captains of the temple, the elders of the nation, and the Roman army, and asked them, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "We are looking for Jesus the Nazarene." (They had no idea what he looked like.) Jesus said, "I am He," and the men fell to the ground. Again he asked them whom they sought, and they said, "Jesus the Nazarene." Jesus assured them they had the right person and then requested that they let his disciples go free so that the word might be fulfilled which he spoke in his prayer to his Father in John 17:12: "While I was with them, I was keeping them in Thy name which Thou hast given Me; and I guarded them, and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled." That prophecy about the son of perdition was Psalm 41:9:

**Even my close friend, in whom I trusted,
Who ate my bread,
Has lifted up his heel against me.**

In ancient cultures, as well as ours, a kiss is usually an outward expression of love, friendship, and affection. But Judas chose this most disarming gesture as a signal for the army to seize Jesus. Judas had been paid thirty pieces of silver, so in order to keep his part of the deal and the money he had been given, he devised a foolproof plan for our Lord's arrest. Mark 14:44-45 says, "Now he who was betraying Him had given them a signal, saying, 'Whomever I shall kiss, He is the one; seize Him, and lead Him away under guard.' And...he immediately went to Him, saying 'Rabbi!' and kissed Him."

In the Greek, there are two words for kiss used here. When Judas says, "Whomever I shall kiss," Mark uses the word *phileo*, which denotes a sign of respect and affection such as one might give to a well-loved rabbi. But when Judas actually kisses Jesus, Mark uses the word *kataphileo*, which means that Judas kissed him with the intensity and ferventness of a lover. Luke then picks up the story and adds, "But Jesus said to him, 'Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?'" Today we still have in our vernacular terms like the kiss of Judas, which is a betrayal by a friend, and the Judas goat, which is a goat that is placed in front of a flock of sheep to lead them to slaughter.

Now we again see the impetuous Peter: "Lord, shall we strike with the sword?" As Peter evaluated the situation, he was going to prove to Jesus, regardless of the six hundred armed men, that he was willing to defend him, but his action reveals that he was not really willing to die with Jesus, and also that he did not understand that the power

of darkness cannot be handled by physical means. In an irrational, fleshly moment he drew out the small but sharp ceremonial sword that he had used earlier to slay the Passover lamb at the temple, and cut off the right ear of the high priest's slave, who was named Malchus (John 18:10). David Gooding wrote in *According to Luke*:

This reaction was natural, the all too natural reaction of mere human nature, unprepared by prayer, ungoverned by the will and wisdom of God, and utterly inappropriate and inadequate to the nature of the conflict that was now upon them. What they were up against was not mere flesh and blood but principalities and powers, the world-rulers of this darkness whose powers lie in twisting all that is genuinely human and true into a diabolical but specious lie. That is not power from which a man can be delivered by physical weapons.

"Jesus said, "Stop! No more of this," and he touched Malchus' ear and healed him. As he had said in Luke 19:10, "...the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"; he had not come to kill the lost! Then according to Matthew 26:52 our Lord said, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword." This statement helps clarify what our Lord meant in Luke 22:36-38. There he had told the disciples that after he left them on earth they should sell their robes for a sword, and they said they had two of them. He then said, "It is enough." He meant, "Enough of this--we are not here to fight in the physical world but in the spiritual world."

Let's consider the arrest and trial of Jesus. (They are covered in more detail in Matthew and John than in Luke, so adding to Luke 22:63-71, let's look at Matthew 26:53-54..) In Matthew Jesus said to his disciples, "Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (A legion was 6,000 men; 6,000 x 12 = 72,000 angels against 600 Roman soldiers--no contest!) But that is not what he would do. He was saying, "If we take on this Roman cohort with swords, then how shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen another way?" In the upper room Jesus had told his disciples just before Judas left to sell him into the hands of the high priests, "The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born" (Matthew 26:24).

Then the Lord chided the religious leaders for the way they came to arrest him as if he were some robber. My goodness, why hadn't they simply arrested him in the temple area where he had been every day since Palm Sunday? But this was the hour that the Son of Man was going as it had been determined (Luke 22:22). Jesus would set aside his life voluntarily, die for the sins of mankind in just this way, so that those who placed their faith in him could experience life. These events were not just blind circumstances; they had all been planned before the foundation of the world. They had been prophesied in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. But predestination and prophecy do not cancel out human responsibility toward God and mankind. At that moment all the disciples left Him and fled because they had not prayed.

According to John 18:13-24, our Lord was taken to the house of the former high priest, Annas, who was the father-in-law of the current high priest, Caiaphas. Peter, trying to keep his word in the power of his flesh, came back out of the darkness with John, and they began to follow Jesus and the crowd into the courtyard of Annas. Standing in the shadows near a charcoal fire, they watched Jesus being questioned and slapped in the face by a guard who did not like the way he answered Annas. (At that moment the slave girl who kept the door asked Peter if he was a disciple of Jesus, and he said "I am not.")

According to Matthew 26:57-68, Jesus was taken in chains to appear before Caiaphas and a few members of the Sanhedrin. Peter, again in the hope that he would prove to Jesus that he was not going to forsake him or deny him, followed them into the courtyard and sat with the officers by another charcoal fire warming himself. The court listened to several false witnesses as Jesus stood in silence. Then finally in frustration Caiaphas said, "'I adjure you by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven' [Psalm 110:1; Daniel 7:13]." At that point Caiaphas tore his robes, accused Jesus of blaspheming God, and condemned him to death. Then some of the men around Caiaphas spat in Jesus' face and beat him with their fists, and others slapped him, then blindfolded him and said mockingly, "Prophecy to us,

You Christ; who is the one who hit You?" Isaiah 53:7-8 says:

**He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.
By oppression and judgment He was taken away.**

The history of Christianity is filled with stories of men and women who proclaimed that they were followers of Jesus Christ but had the heart of Judas. Judas had followed Jesus hoping for political power and economical gain, but it became apparent that nothing he had planned was working out, so rather than just walking away, he came back at Jesus with a lover's kiss and betrayed him for a bag of silver. According to Matthew 27:3-10, after Jesus was taken before Pilate and condemned, we find that Judas

"...felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to that yourself!' And he threw the pieces of silver into the sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hung himself. And the chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood.' And they counseled together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers...Then (see Matthew 27:9-10) that which was spoken [six hundred years earlier] through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled, saying, 'AND THEY TOOK THE THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER, THE PRICE OF THE ONE WHOSE PRICE HAD BEEN SET by the sons of Israel; AND THEY GAVE THEM FOR THE POTTER'S FIELD, AS THE LORD DIRECTED ME' [Zechariah 11:12-13]."

The denial of Peter

And having arrested Him, they led Him away, and brought Him to the house of the high priest; but Peter was following at a distance. And after they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter was sitting among them. And a certain servant-girl, seeing him as he sat in the firelight, and looking intently at him, said, "This man was with Him too." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know Him." And a little later, another saw him and said, "You are one of them too!" But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" And after about an hour had passed, another man began to insist, saying, "Certainly this man also was with Him, for he is a Galilean too." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, a cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had told him, "Before a cock crows today, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:54-62)

After the Passover meal was finished Jesus had told Peter and the other disciples that Satan had demanded permission to sift them like wheat, but he said, "...I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you [Peter], when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Peter in a moment of boastful fleshliness, had said, "Lord, with you I am ready to go both to prison and to death!" Jesus had replied, "I say to you, Peter, the cock will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me" (Luke 22:32, 33-34). (The Greek word for "deny," *aparneomai*, means to utterly deny that one has any relationship with a person.) Later in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, according to Matthew 26:31-35, our Lord had told the disciples that they would all fall away when the Shepherd was struck down. Peter had once again responded, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away." Jesus had then warned, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a cock crows, you shall deny Me three times." And Peter, like a proud, strident rooster himself, said, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." All the other disciples said the same thing.

As we have already noted, the apostle John relates in his gospel that a slave girl in the house of Annas first asked Peter if he was a disciple of Jesus, and he answered, "I am not" (John 18:13-24). When Jesus was taken to the courtyard of Caiaphas the official high priest, Peter followed them, found some men sitting around a charcoal fire, and joined them. While he was sitting in the warmth and security of the fire, another slave girl saw his face in the

glow of the firelight and said, "This man was with him, too. " But he denied it saying, "Woman, I do not know him" (Luke 22:56-57).

Then Peter moved away from the courtyard fire and walked out onto the porch (Mark 14:68). At that point a maid saw him (perhaps the same girl once more), and while Jesus was being accused inside, she accused Peter out on the porch in front of the bystanders, "You are one of them, too!" But Peter said to the men standing around, "Man, I am not!" (Luke 22:58).

An hour passed, and while Jesus was still being questioned by the Sanhedrin at the high priest's home, Peter was approached for the fourth time by a man who would not have forgotten who Peter was--he was a relative of Malchus, the slave whose ear Peter had cut off and Jesus had healed. So he questioned Peter, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" (John 18:26). Then turning to the other men he said, "Certainly this man also was with Him, for He is a Galilean too!" (Those who lived in Jerusalem had a different Hebrew accent.) At that moment Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about" (Luke 22:60). And Mark 14:71 tells us, "But he began to curse and swear, 'I do not know this man you are talking about!'" (Peter was not cursing Jesus, but calling down curses on himself if he was not telling the truth.)

"And immediately, while he was still speaking, a cock crowed" (Luke 22:60). In the midst of the trial in the inner court, apparently Jesus could turn his head and look out the door to the porch, and his eyes looked deep into Peter's eyes for a moment. "And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had told him, 'Before a cock crows today, you will deny Me three times.'"

It appears that Peter actually denied Jesus four times, not just three. Jesus' prediction of a threefold denial by Peter does not preclude a fourth denial. Peter denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed, and then the cock crowed while he was in his fourth denial.

Peter's pride was shattered by a proud rooster: "And he went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). Jesus' comment, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak," suddenly found meaning in that one brief glance from Jesus. And yet coupled with Jesus' warning that Peter would be sifted by Satan was also his promise that he had prayed for Peter that he would not lose his faith in Jesus as his Lord and Messiah, but that once he returned, his ministry was to strengthen all the other disciples who had run away (and the subsequent generations of disciples who would be tempted to deny Jesus because of the fearful circumstances they would find themselves in). John 21 records that after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter encountered him on the shores of the sea of Galilee preparing some fish for him on a charcoal fire. Peter's heart was both thrilled and broken. After Jesus asked the once proud Peter if he loved him three times, the humbled fisherman said he really did. At that time Jesus forgave him and gave him his ministry: "Feed my sheep." (We'll look at this story in greater detail later.)

Some thirty years later a humble and faithful Peter wrote to the suffering Christians in Turkey who were facing severe religious persecution from Rome. He recalled his own temptation to deny Christ and the pride that caused his failure, and he poured everything he had learned from that into these words: "You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith..." (1 Peter 5:5-9).

Have you ever been tempted to deny you are a disciple of Jesus? Mohammed Ismail and his three friends were arrested for witnessing about Jesus to their Moslem friends, and during his imprisonment Ismail said, "I will never deny Christ." But after the beating in the Tribulation Sector he and his two friends were released from prison as professing Moslems. They were tempted and they gave in. Under those circumstances I wonder if we all would not be tempted to deny Jesus as our Lord. I hope most of us will never have to face such intense persecution for our faith in Jesus. And yet I find myself almost daily being placed in a variety of circumstances in which I am tempted to deny, in actions or in words, my relationship with Jesus. I notice this temptation occurs when I feel the

tempted to deny, in actions or in words, my relationship with Jesus. I know the temptation occurs when I feel the threat that if I act or speak out for the Lord I might be rejected as a person. In those moments of threat I forget to pray because I am too busy trying to protect myself.

About twenty years ago I had a life-changing experience on a plane ride to Portland. I was flying there on business for a publishing firm. I had an aisle seat on the left side of the plane. The seat next to me was empty, but the window seat was occupied by a smartly dressed businesswoman in her early forties. We introduced ourselves, and for the next hour or so we had a wonderful conversation about our families and the different places we had traveled. Then, as the captain announced that we were to fasten our seat belts for landing in some fifteen minutes, the woman turned to me and said, "By the way, what do you do for a living?" I suddenly experienced an inner struggle and finally said, "I'm a teacher." She said, "How interesting! And what do you teach?" I searched for an answer as the pressure started building and came up with, "Literature." She immediately came back with, "What period of history?" Almost in a panic I answered, "Sixteenth century." She stared at me for what felt like an eternity, and then her eyes narrowed as she concluded forcefully, "You're a preacher, aren't you?" And, tied up in my aisle seat with nowhere to go, I replied very weakly, "Yes." I'll never forget what she said as long as I live: "Why didn't you just say so in the first place?" I looked at the floor, and in disgust she turned away and looked out the window until we landed, and we didn't exchange another word.

I think most of us are tempted to deny Christ as our Lord, Savior, Provider, and Shepherd when (1) we stop praying about all the circumstances of our daily lives and allow ourselves to fall into the attitude that we can handle life's challenges on our own.

I think that we open ourselves up to deny Christ when (2) we see our personal lives, health, security, family, children, and homes threatened, and in a fit of anxiety we start focusing on building up our defenses.

I think we open ourselves up to deny Christ as our Lord when (3) we become too busy in the affairs of the world, the family, or the church, so that we acquire the sense, once again, that the solution to our problems depends on us and us alone.

Lord, forgive us for trying to live out our lives before you in our boastful flesh. Please teach us to pray so that we will not enter into the daily temptation to deny you. Thank you for understanding that our spirit is willing to follow you even to death, but our flesh is weak.

"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen"
(Jude 24-25).

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