

## *Whatever Works*

John 18

March 26, 2023

Please open your Bibles today to John 18. Pew Bible. The first 12 chapters of John's gospel cover about 3 years of Jesus' life, an average of 4 chapters per year. Once you get to chapter 13, however, John puts the brakes on and the next 6 chapters cover only about 24 hours, an average of four hours per chapter. So a lot happens in John 18, but we're going to focus mainly on Peter's denials today and then get to some other details perhaps on Wed night. But a lot will happen in the next few hours just as a lot has happened in the last few. Just a few days ago, on Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. On Monday, He cleared the temple and on Tuesday He taught about end times. Earlier on Thursday, just a few hours ago now, John 13 tells us He dined with His disciples around the Passover Table and washed their feet. He taught them much while they were still in the Upper Room and continued to teach them in John 15 and 16 as they made their way toward the Garden. Along the way, He prayed for His disciples, both those then and us now as we looked at last week in John 17. Which brings us today to John 18. If your able please stand as we begin this passage:

1 When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was an olive grove, and he and his disciples went into it. 2 Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. 3 So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. 4 Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?" 5 "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) 6 When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. 7 Again he asked them, "Who is it you want?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." 8 "I told you that I am he," Jesus answered. "If you are looking for me, then let these men go." 9 This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me."

Jesus and His disciples finally make their way across the Kidron Valley and enter the olive grove that the other gospel writers identify as Gethsemane, meaning olive press, which we've discussed before. From John, we learn that Jesus and His disciples often met there probably for prayer as well as teaching. I wouldn't be surprised if they hadn't spent some nights there as I'm sure lodging would have been hard to come by during the Passover Feast. It was such a favorite spot, that Judas knew right where to find them. Either Jesus had told them in the upper room they were headed there or, as it seems more likely, they just went there that often.

So sometime after the disciples got there, Judas arrived with some soldiers. These are not Roman forces, but Jewish ones under the authority of the chief priest and some of his officials were also on hand for this midnight takedown. They knew better than to arrest him in public as the crowd might revolt. How ironic that a similar situation now hangs over the possible arrest of our former president. This gives us an idea of the tensions and the stakes involved in Jerusalem in those days. In addition to torches, John tells us they're armed in case something goes south. And it does, though not from Jesus, as we'll see shortly.

John also reminds us of Jesus' perfect foreknowledge. He knew all that was going to happen to Him. So when He shows them His drivers' license, His ID, the soldiers fall back, possibly to take defensive positions expecting a battle. The other Gospels also tell us Judas kissed Jesus to help identify Him. But Jesus readily steps forward and attempts to dismiss His disciples to safety in order to fulfill yet another prophecy. Many more would be fulfilled before the next day's sunset.

And that's when Peter steps up. "Not on my watch!" He declares with the boldness of Custer and lunges toward the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. Say ouch. Obviously he wasn't aiming for his ear. He was aiming for his neck or the crown of his head. But Peter's a fisherman, not a swordsman and he misses and slices off an ear instead. Note that John is specific: not just "an ear," but his right ear. Touch your right ear and imagine it being cut off. We also learn later that John was acquainted with the High Priest so that's probably why he knows this servant's name. Say Malchus. Jesus rebukes Peter for this outburst of bravery or defense or whatever motivated it. Perhaps even pride. And in exceedingly great mercy, even during His own unjust arrest, Luke tells us that Jesus restored the ear of one who was arresting him. Say Grace.

After His last miraculous healing, Jesus is cuffed and led off to face the first of many trials that night before the high priest, Annas. Look back at verse 15 Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, 16 but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in. 17 "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not."

Wait, what? Isn't this the guy who swore just a few hours ago that he would die with Jesus if need be? As Jesus is being led like a lamb to the slaughter, at least two of His disciples are trying to keep up. Peter and presumably John. Determined, perhaps to show their love and devotion to the One who has led them these past three years. John apparently has some connection with the high priest and gained entry to Annas' house while Peter had to wait outside till John gave the door-keeper the OK to admit

him. Which brings about the first of Peter's denials. Apparently John didn't deny his connection to Jesus and openly admitted it, while Peter, when questioned flatly denied it. I'm sure the question caught him off guard and this was the first thing that came to his mind. It seemed the safest thing to say. "I am not one of His disciples." He might have still been stewing over Jesus' rebuke in front of the others back in the Garden. "If Jesus doesn't want my help, I won't give it." We don't know why he denied it, but I wonder what kind of a look John gave him when he did. He was admitted nevertheless.

Vs 18 It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself. Skip down to Vs 25 As Simon Peter stood warming himself, he was asked, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it, saying, "I am not."

So while His Master is on trial chained up and humiliated, likely shivering in the cold, Peter is trying to keep warm. Let us be very careful whose fire we warm ourselves beside. The warmth and comfort of the enemy's fire pit can cause us to deny our Lord. Sometimes it's better to be cold. Peter was now doing the thing that was most convenient and best for Peter. He was in self-preservation mode perhaps while still trying to appear devoted to Jesus. Many people today want to appear connected to Jesus but not too much. They attend worship occasionally or throw in a prayer comment now and then, but they're not willing to put their necks on the line for Him. Are you in or out? Jesus knows.

Whatever the reason, since he had spoken the first lie to the girl at the gate, Peter now had to follow it up with another to the man by the fire. And then comes the third. Vs 26 One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?" 27 Again Peter denied it," Of course he did. He had to. Although the lighting was bad in the Garden, one of Malchus' cousins evidently got a pretty good look at the one who smote his relative. Perhaps some of the blood was still on Peter's clothes? Matthew tells us that this third time Peter even called down curses on himself and swore to them, "I don't know the man!"

And vs 27 says, "and at that moment (old Rojo) a rooster began to crow." And suddenly Peter remembered that Jesus had told him back in the Upper Room that this very thing would happen within a few hours. He remembered it alright, but it was 3 denials too late. Although the other 10 disciples all deserted Jesus that night, only Peter, as far as we know, actually disowned Him. And that in fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy that he would do exactly this in spite of Peter's insistence that he never would! Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. Never say never. As soon as we think we're above certain temptations, beware. That pride is a knife that opens our tent for all manner of demons to enter. How many of us have, like Peter, sit in church on Sunday promising to turn from all sin and follow Jesus' example, only to disobey and bring Him

disgrace before the week is out. Or even the day. “Oh, I’ll **never** do that! I’d never fall for that one!” And it ends up being that very one we fall for. Thank God for His forgiveness and grace! Both for Peter and for us!

How could Peter have done such a thing? By doing the expedient thing, the convenient thing. Say expedient. Whatever works. He did what **seemed** right at the time, like we often do. He did what he thought he had to do to save his own neck. Mobsters and politicians do it all the time. Just do what you have to do. And we do it all the time too. If Peter told the truth, he might end up hanging beside Jesus. Surely that couldn’t be God’s plan. Besides, knowing Peter, he’s probably working on an escape plan, a rescue strategy. If he admits he cut off an ear, it’s over. So he lies. Not once, not twice, but three times. “I don’t even know the man.” Say Whatever Works.

Before we blame Peter too much, let’s examine ourselves. How often do we do that? Someone asks us a direct question that will implicate us if we tell the truth. We weren’t expecting it and so we lie before we know it. Besides the person who asked is our enemy and he doesn’t deserve the truth anyway, right? So we sell our soul for whatever works. When have we done the expedient thing instead of the right thing? The thing that seemed best for us even though we knew it was wrong. The thing that was safest or most pleasurable, but ended up causing the most pain. Whatever works. Many people live that way. Pragmatism it’s called. Do whatever you have to do. To make a buck. To get by. To get ahead. To get loved. If you have to lie, you lie. If you have to steal, you steal. Do whatever you have to do. It’s a **very** popular way to live and very dangerous. Augustine once said, “Many, for the love of staying alive, have died eternally.”

Peter would have been wise to do some preplanning and we would too. The devil often launches surprise attacks but we can preplan. Before we judge Peter too severely, let’s put our own swords back and do some self-examination. When are you most vulnerable to temptation? In the dark when none of your friends are around? When you’re near the enemy’s fire? Stay out of them places! When we have just been rebuked or corrected? What would cause **us** to deny Jesus? Who do you want to not lose respect from? Or risk crossing? A family member? Your boyfriend or girlfriend? The popular kids? Your students? Your teachers? Your grandchildren or grandparents? Co-workers? Your boss? For politicians, the electorate? Whose opinion and acceptance do we value more than that of Jesus Christ? Or who do we fear more than Him? Let’s anticipate these situations and decide ahead of time how we want to respond when they come.

After Easter, Peter would become so very bold. But that night he couldn’t see the resurrection. All he could see was his possible demise. So he lied like a coward. And although others there may not have heard him, Jesus did. For as that rooster crowed, Jesus turned, looked through the crowd, and locked eyes with Peter. Was it an angry

look? I think not. Disappointed? Perhaps. Loving? Most assuredly. But Peter could only think of his heinous sin that he could not undo. His despicable self-serving attitude that just denied his Lord, Master, Teacher and Friend. Luke tells us that when their eyes met, Peter (22:62) "... went outside and wept bitterly." Yeah, I bet he did. Have you ever wished you could take back some words? Some actions? But it's too late. You and God both know it's too late. So without a chance to apologize, explain, or make excuse, Peter went out and didn't just weep, he wept bitterly. Say bitterly. With waves of guilt and shame crashing over him. Convicted and embarrassed by his own depravity, his own weakness.

Peter's tears demonstrate his true sorrow for his sin. When's the last time you wept over your sins? Not that you got caught, but for the pain you and disappointment you caused Jesus. Is your spirit tender and sensitive? Or hard as granite? When the Holy Spirit convicts us, may we be as sensitive as Peter to weep over our failures and seek God's mercy and forgiveness. I have to wonder about this elephant in the room when Jesus appeared to His disciples a few days later. Until Jesus reinstated him, I bet Peter avoided all eye contact, his shame keeping him at arm's length. One who had been so close. One of Jesus' inner three. Would he be allowed to join the other disciples? Would he ever be allowed to work for God again? Was his ministry over?

Peter could have crashed and burned like Judas who took his own life. But by the grace of God, Peter kept going and became the leader of the early church. Remember it was Peter who ran with John to the tomb on resurrection morning. I believe his desire to apologize and make things right poured in extra adrenaline speeding his legs. He wanted another chance. It was Peter who jumped out of the boat in John 21 eager to get to shore to see Jesus. And it was Peter who became the spokesman on the Day of Pentecost just 53 days after this night proclaiming Jesus as Lord in spite of the great risk. Something happened in between this night and that day and what happened was the resurrection we'll talk about in two weeks. Peter's denials before Jesus' death amplifies his unashamed public preaching after Jesus' resurrection. It serves as powerful evidence of how convinced Peter was that Jesus rose from the dead! If it were a lie, do you think somebody who denied Jesus 3 times to save his own neck would now be promoting Him at the very real risk of his life?

Peter's denials are also proof that all the Bible is accurate. In those days an author like John would **NEVER** have a hero display any weakness, especially something so gross and obvious as this. Publicly. Three times. Directly. You'd just conveniently leave that part out. But the Bible is brutally honest. It includes warts and all. John and the other Gospel writers record Peter's sin in living color so that all of us who have ever fallen in a moment of weakness, in a moment of temptation, in a moment of expediency of whatever works might know there is forgiveness and restoration available to us as well. Come in a couple weeks when we read about that in John 21 to hear how Jesus gently but firmly restored Peter. Over and over in the Bible and here again with Peter,

we learn that with God, failure is never final. As we confess and turn from our sins, Jesus forgives us and empowers us to go forward. Even though Peter denied Jesus three times that night, God wasn't done with Peter. He was just getting started! He's not done with you either. Let's confess our sins, receive God's grace and move forward to serve Him.