

# ***“Jesus and Peter on Trial”***

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from 2011 New International Version.)*

***What kind of man does God put in charge? The kind that fails his biggest test.***

***John 18:15-27***

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## ***Three responses***

By now, most everyone has heard about Will Smith slapping Chris Rock in the face at the Oscars two weeks ago. The YouTube video has been viewed almost 100 million times. My first reaction was condescension. He deserves the most impulsive Oscar. My second was empathy. He should get the best husband Oscar. I would have wanted to do the same if someone had joked about my wife’s illness.

I have a similar reaction to the reading of John 18. We have multiple nominations for the best imposter Oscar. Peter, you were just pretending to be a disciple. How could you deny Jesus? Annas, you’re just pretending to be a judge. Oh, and the guy who slapped Jesus? He doesn’t deserve the title “official.”

The second response is more humble than the first. Maybe I should be nominated as well. Would I not have judged Jesus if I sat in Annas’ seat, or denied him if in Peter’s shoes? There’s more. I not only realize I *could have* done that to Jesus, I *did* do that to Jesus. My sins caused Jesus’ suffering. I get the Oscar for worst pretender.

I don’t mean to minimize the point that Jesus was suffering for your sins and mine. But I don’t think that is the reason that all four gospel writers include the story of Peter’s three denials. There’s another reason this story must be told again and again.

## ***Who’s in this story***

Let’s review the characters in John 18:15-27.

- *Jesus*. We know him as the Son of God who died and rose again, but nobody in this text has that full picture. They know him as a miracle-sign worker who has attracted a large following to listen to strange teachings.
- *Peter*. He's in the inner circle of Jesus' inner circle. He's heard more and seen more than almost anyone else, but precisely for that reason what is happening on this night is both unexpected and confusing. He had sworn hours earlier that he would never abandon Jesus. To his credit he had defended Jesus with a sword only to be told by Jesus to put it away.
- *Another disciple*. He's not named, so his identity is not important. Some think he's John, who is another member of Jesus' inner circle and the author of this gospel. I don't, but I don't think it matters if you do.
- *Annas*. He's a wealthy, arrogant, powerful religious aristocrat who knows how to play politics with the occupying Roman government. Jesus had overturned the moneychangers' tables on Monday of that week because the monopoly on temple sacrifices amounted to religious extortion. Annas was at the top of that odious pyramid. He had served a decade as a Roman-appointed high priest, but when they deposed him he was still high priest-emeritus and appointed his sons and son-in-law as replacements. Puppets, really. Jews didn't esteem him; they feared him.
- *Caiaphas*. Annas' son-in-law held the title of "high priest" *that year*. High priest was never supposed to be a merry-go-round. Enough said.
- *Servants and officials*. It's hard to know how many of them are involved, but they are all likely Jewish and not Roman. Even the "soldiers" who arrested Jesus are essentially temple police, and there are other high officials in Annas' court to protect and serve this religious autocrat day and night. Everyone there defers to him and fears him.
- *The rooster*. He's more important to the story than you might think.

### ***The trials***

In John 18, both Jesus and Peter are being tried – in different ways and for different reasons. In neither case is it a trial in the legal sense – a formal examination of evidence. "Trial" in this context means an ordeal that proves character. Are you who you say you are? Let's test and find out. Jesus passes his test. Peter fails miserably.

*Jesus on Trial*. Not everyone agrees, but I think the "high priest" mentioned in verse 19 is Annas. This is a post-arrest preliminary hearing.

After the raising of Lazarus, the Sanhedrin had met formally, called witnesses, and decided Jesus must die. Caiaphas had said more than he understood – "It's better that one man dies for the sake of the nation than that the whole nation should perish." From the standpoint of the religious leaders, the question ever since was not whether Jesus should be executed, but how to make it happen without causing trouble with the

Romans or the masses. The Palm Sunday procession and Jesus' popular teaching during Passover week had made their task more difficult, but the outcome was never in doubt.

The point of this particular "trial" before Annas is first of all, a "gotcha" moment for Annas. He thinks he's succeeded, with Judas' help, in finding Jesus under the cover of darkness when Jerusalem and all the Passover pilgrims are asleep. He thinks he's outwitted Jesus when in reality, Jesus is totally in control. Jesus is using Annas to accomplish a much grander vision that was his mission all along – to die for our sins.

John's purpose in recording this conversation is to show once again that Jesus always speaks the truth, and does so openly. The proper procedure, which hardly mattered to Annas in this moment, was to have witnesses charge Jesus. As with our fifth amendment, the accused did not have to take the stand. When Jesus says, "I said nothing in secret" and "I spoke the truth," he is displaying his indisputable integrity. Annas pretends before all these bystanders to inquire about Jesus' teaching and disciples. He is actually betraying his duplicity by even asking the questions. Jesus ends up with a Will Smith-like slap in the face, as if you can smack sense into the One who was in the beginning with God, through whom all things were made.

*Peter on Trial.* There will be much more ahead in Jesus' trials. It's far from over. Peter, though, disappears from John's gospel after his denials until Sunday morning. He's not mentioned through Jesus' trials, including the crucifixion and burial. He surfaces at the tomb resurrection day. This is his final trial. And he fails, miserably.

The denials begin innocently enough. Having been rebuked by Jesus in the Garden for brandishing his sword, Peter's the only one of the Eleven (unless one of them is "the other disciple") who is brave enough to follow the detachment of soldiers carrying torches, lanterns, and weapons to the notorious Annas, who was a mafia boss in his power and brutality. Peter is loyal, determined that Jesus will not be alone.

He is met at the door by a slave girl stationed there to be sure no unauthorized person gains entry. She's not important, but her role is. The unnamed "other disciple," the one with connections, gestures at Peter and whispers in her ear, "He can come in."

Rather innocently, hardly noticing him except that he's unfamiliar to her, she asks Peter, "*You* are not one of this man's disciples, are you?"

"I'm not," he answers impulsively and quickly. Had that been Peter's only denial, I doubt if it would have been recorded in the annals of history. He wasn't lying for self-protection. He told a little fib for Jesus' sake. Who else did Jesus have? Peter would be a friendly face and kind eyes. He would be a witness to whatever happened.

Peter enters the dimly lit room, trying to be incognito among soldiers and officials warming themselves around a charcoal stove. Jesus is being accused, threatened, and slapped. Peter doesn't know whether to stand up for him or not.

There's nothing he can do. This time several sets of eyes are on him and they ask him, "You are not one of his disciples are you?" His response is the same: "I am not."

One of Annas' slaves warming himself at the fire won't let this go. He's heard about Peter whacking off his cousin's ear at the arrest. This guy presses the point: "Did I not *personally* see you in the Garden?" A third denial follows, and a rooster crows.

You may recall from the other Gospels that Peter cursed in his third denial. You may remember that he went out and wept bitterly. You may remember that Jesus caught his eye. John doesn't record any of that. For John, the rooster ends the story.

### ***Third response***

The details are different in all four gospels, but that only adds to the credibility of the core story. This really happened, and four separate evangelists thought it was too intriguing – and critical – to omit it. You *have* to know about this. Why? To embarrass Peter? So there will be 100 million readers of his embarrassing and impulsive actions?

No. Because of who Peter will be. Peter is being tried by fire so he can become the undisputed leader among the Twelve in the early church. His words and actions will dominate Acts 1-12. What kind of man does God put in charge of his church? The kind that fails his trial.

Pastor Paul pointed out to me on Thursday that the rooster's role in this story is misunderstood. We tend to think of the rooster as Jesus' "told you so" moment. Maybe not. A rooster's crow signals dawn. I doubt if Peter heard it that way on Good Friday. Dawn doesn't feel very hopeful when you haven't slept all night.

Maybe Peter realized later that Jesus tied his denials to the rooster because the rooster would signal a new beginning. He hit bottom that morning, but bottom would not be the end of his story. I don't think Simon would have become Peter without his three denials. He would not have become the leader the early church needed – humble but courageous – without the story of John 18.

The third response I need to make to this memorable series of events – after I first accuse Annas and Peter and then myself just like them – is to let the Holy Spirit bring to mind someone who seems as far from usefulness to Jesus as possible.

The rooster is the second most common steeple topper in churches. Especially in France, but all across Europe and even here in the US, many churches – both Catholic and Protestant – feature a rooster instead of cross. There are many reasons, all connected to Peter's denials. The rooster faces into the wind, because only by facing our trials head on do we allow God to do his work, to turn Simons into Peters. The rooster is a symbol of God's grace that brings us to a place of deep failure so that we know from that point on it's only Jesus that can make anything out of us. Amen.