

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Son of the Living God, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

I don't hold much stock in the judicial system. In my lifetime I've seen too many cases where the guilty go free and innocent people have been wrongly accused and sentenced to serve out long prison terms and even sent to death row only to later, sometimes decades later, be exonerated by DNA evidence or other witnesses who come forward and in some cases actually confess to the crime. I remember the case of the Central Park Five from around 1989. Five poor black teens and young adults were falsely accused of raping a white upper-class woman as she jogged through Central Park in New York City. All five of these men spent more than 30 years in prison until they were found innocent because of DNA evidence. Then there was the famous case of the Duke Men's Lacrosse team. In about 2006 several of the members of men's Lacrosse team were similarly accused of rape. Like the Central Park 5, the Duke students were all teens or young men. The media coverage of the case was massive, and the public early on turned against the Duke athletes. The Duke students were all from well connected families and hired the best legal minds money could buy. Because of the lack of evidence that a crime had even been committed, the charges were eventually dropped against all of the Duke students, but not before they lost their reputations.

It's clear to me that the judicial system in every era of history has had trouble ensuring innocent people aren't unjustly punished. Let's examine the case against Jesus of Nazareth... For three years Jesus had been teaching and preaching in the synagogues and even in the Temple in Jerusalem. While no video evidence exists to prove exactly what Jesus taught and preached, the Jewish Law stated that in a trial the accused had the right to not be directly questioned. We still have a similar provision today. You cannot be forced to testify against yourself. Yet in this sham of a trial Annas directly questions Jesus who smartly replies that everything he has taught and preached was out in the open. He then asks where are your witnesses against me... That's how a trial is supposed to go. The prosecution presents the facts, including witnesses who testify they heard Jesus saying this or that in order to prove he had spoken inappropriately about God or His relationship with God. John tells us of no such witnesses. Only that the bound Jesus was grilled and when he had the audacity to question the process, the Temple Police struck Him.

There are a couple of notable things in this first part of the trial of Jesus that jump out. First, let us remember that the body of the Son of God was bound in order that we might be set free from the bonds of sin and Satan. Second, do not think that because Jesus was arrested and bound that he had lost control of the situation. Right before our text for today, when the soldiers, the police, and Judas approached Jesus in the Garden, Jesus asked who they were looking for. When

they answered they were looking for Jesus his reply was the great I AM. At this all the soldiers and the police fell backwards to the ground. This happened not once but twice to emphasize the power in simply uttering the Name of God. Once this display of power had been accomplished Jesus allowed himself to be arrested and bound. Never forget that in John's Gospel, Jesus is always in control. Even at the moment of his death, in John's Gospel Jesus doesn't just die or breath his last. No, John says Jesus "gave up his spirit." Jesus decides when His time has come and never relinquishes that power. His crucifixion is the moment of his glorification, not his demise. For Jesus, kingship, obedience, and suffering are inseparable in the establishment of the salvation of God for you.

In my pondering and meditation, I've concluded that Annas and then later Caiaphas, had no interest in making this a legally sufficient trial. They had no intention of trying Jesus under their Jewish system. On the contrary, their entire intent was to turn Jesus over to Pilate and to make this a political trial overseen by the Romans in order to keep their own hands clean and to ensure Jesus received the worst capital punishment the Romans could deal out. So, they ignored their own Jewish laws and regulations requiring witnesses to prove their case, that the accused would not be directly questioned, that there would be at least two days from arrest to trial, that no trial would occur at night, and finally that the accused would not be harmed or injured. All of these laws were violated, making this trial

nothing more than a sham or a show for the people. The intent all along was to move Jesus from the Jewish court into the Roman “civil” or secular justice system. The charge would ultimately become treason as Jesus would be accused of making himself the King of the Jews...

Now let's move on and pivot to our dear hapless Peter... Remember that Peter had just moments before proudly proclaimed that even if all the others fall away, he alone would stand by Jesus during his time of trial and tribulation. To be fair, Peter did try to defend Jesus at his arrest by cutting off the ear of the slave of the High Priest. But now, when the chips are down, what does he do? Peter denies Jesus not once or twice, but three times, exactly as Jesus had predicted he would. I've said many times that John's Gospel is significantly different from the other three, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There are only a handful of stories recorded by all four Evangelists. One is the feeding of the multitudes, and the other is this story of Peter's threefold denial. It must have been a genuine historical occurrence for all of them to recall the same event and secondly, it must have been an important story for the early church and subsequently for all of us. Peter often in the Gospels is the foil or the representative who speaks for all the disciples. In this story of his denial of Jesus Peter represents all of us. At some time or other we've all denied knowing Jesus. Before you get all offended hear me out.



Have you ever seen the Heisman Trophy? Here's a picture... (SLIDE) Notice the football player's pose. He's holding his arm out in order to stiff arm the defensive player and keep him away from the football, but also so that he can advance the ball toward his own goal, maybe only another yard or two, sometimes much more. My point here is that at times I've been guilty of holding Jesus back so that I might advance my own agenda, my own will and desire. I've stiff armed Jesus even in noble things like trying to grow the Church or adding some new program that I just know will bring more people to know Jesus. Any time I put my plan ahead of Jesus' plan, I'm doing the exact same thing Peter did as he warmed his hands by the fire all those years ago. I don't believe I'm the only one guilty of giving God the stiff arm when called to some task we don't particularly want to do.

In John's Gospel account we get just the facts, like the old Dragnet TV detective show. In Luke we find out that Peter went out and wept bitterly after that third denial and then hearing the rooster crow. Although not expressly stated in John, I can imagine the shame and embarrassment Peter must have felt when he realized what he had done.



Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose the Rooster as the sign that would alert Peter to his sin? (SLIDE) He could have easily said, "before sunrise you will deny me three times," but he used the

image of the rooster. A rooster is one who is so sure of himself that he makes a grand show. His plumage is brilliantly colored and he struts around the hen house like he owns the place. Roosters are proud birds, and they announce their glorious presence with a loud Cock-a-doodle-doo! We don't like to think about it, but roosters are a sign of our own sin of pride and reliance on our own selves for our security. We often hold Jesus at a distance, so he doesn't interfere with our own priorities or our own agendas. Every time I see a Rooster in Christian art I think about those times when I denied what I knew to be God's will in favor of doing my own thing... At times I, like Peter have gone out and wept bitterly...

The Good News is that our denials, our sin doesn't define us. We are defined by God's love and God's forgiveness. John is also the only Gospel that includes the line from the angel who greeted Mary at the empty tomb, Go and tell the disciples *and Peter*, that He is risen and has gone to Galilee just as he said he would... None of the other Gospels add those words, "*and Peter*" to the resurrection experience. John wants us to know that all of our denials, all of our sin, doesn't permanently separate us from Jesus or from God's love. We are still loved and can never be separated from God's love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Now that's what I call good news for those of us who know we've sinned!

May God's love always override your guilt. May God's forgiveness always follow our stiff-arms until we finally drop the Heisman illusion that we can hold

off sin, death and the devil and finally learn to rely on our Savior Jesus alone.

Thanks be to God for roosters, but even more thanks for our Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen!