

It's rare for a murder victim to be put on trial for his own murder but essentially that's what happened in 1921 in Alabama. Catholic priest, Father James Coyle (**picture**), made the social blunder of officiating the wedding of Ruth Stephenson (**picture**) and Pedro Gussman (**picture**), a Puerto Rican.

Ruth Stephenson's father, Edwin (**picture**) claimed to be a Methodist minister but had no church. He made a living by hanging around the courthouse, offering to marry (for a modest fee), runaway kids and others who wanted to tie the knot quickly, without their parents' knowledge. Ruth was his only child. Edwin Stephenson was also a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

As a teen, Ruth secretly converted to Catholicism. When her parents found out, they were horrified and beat her! Under Alabama law a young woman wasn't free of parental control even at age 18, unless she got married. Ruth became romantically involved with Pedro Gussman. A hard worker, Pedro had boarded with the Stephensons for some weeks while remodeling their home. When Ruth turned eighteen, she accepted Pedro's proposal to be his wife.

For obvious reasons, the couple made a plan that was both secret and swift. A lunch-hour bus ride to a neighboring jurisdiction where they could secure a marriage license and with a short walk to a nearby Catholic church, have the priest marry them. Father Coyle performed the wedding, but did so with much trepidation. Ruth's father had threatened his life several times. He shared with his assistant: "Her father will probably kill me for this" and Edwin Stephenson did just that.

Having heard of the marriage later that day (at Father Coyle's insistence, Ruth had left a message for him), Edwin Stephenson took his gun, walked to the rectory and fired three shots into the Father Coyle.

Stephenson was defended by attorney Hugo Black (**picture**). He pled not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. The KKK stacked the jury. They seemed swayed by Black's emphasis on the horrors the Stephensons endured in raising their daughter amidst the efforts of Catholics to invade their sacred home and destroy their only child's life. Black went on to suggest, that if there were any cause to doubt the depravity Father Coyle had enabled, one need only look at Pedro's dark complexion. Perhaps he was secretly of African descent and Father Coyle had violated Alabama law. When the verdict came back, the jury acquitted Edwin Stephenson of cold blooded murder.

But his defense attorney, Hugo Black, was a rising star. He went on to become a United States Senator and eventually was nominated to serve on the United States Supreme Court. He was the 5th longest serving justice and one of the most influential Supreme Court justices in the 20th century. Hugo Black, the crooked lawyer who got a murderer off served on the greatest court of our land. It was a horrible injustice! This morning we're talking about another injustice. The greatest injustice of all time is found in Luke 22:47-71 (p. 882), **The night God was arrested**.

It's the endgame in the plot to kill Jesus and will play out through the rest of this chapter and the next. We're looking at the Jewish side of the conspiracy today and next week will look at the Roman side.

It's easy to read this narrative and think how terrible Judas, Peter, the soldiers and Jewish leaders were. Yet, are we that far removed from them? Rembrandt (**picture**), the great Dutch artist, has a painting of the crucifixion in which your attention is first drawn to the dying Savior. Then, you notice the crowd gathered around the cross with their various attitudes and actions. Finally, you notice at the edge of the picture a lone figure nearly hidden in the shadows. It's Rembrandt. The great artist realized that his sins had helped to nail Jesus to the cross, and so he painted himself into the picture. And so should we!

From this point on in Luke's narrative, Jesus will be in the custody of His enemies and on His way to the cross. If you're taking notes...

Our Lord faced the cruelty of betrayal. Have you ever been betrayed? Had a close friend turn against you? Betrayal is a word reserved for friends or loved ones. A stranger can't betray you. Betrayal is a breach of faith, treachery, duplicity. In the lonely garden among the ancient olive trees, Jesus neglected becomes Jesus rejected and finally, Jesus betrayed.

William Tyndale (**picture**) is famous for his translation of the Bible. His burning passion was to translate the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into English but his work was considered a crime. He was forced to flee England and go into hiding in Europe. Eventually, he was burned at the stake.

His capture though came as result of a betrayal by a friend, Henry Phillips. Tyndale had shared meals with Phillips, trusted and confided in him. One day Phillips led Tyndale down a narrow passage straight into the arms of his enemies. Like Judas, Phillips was paid handsomely for his treachery, and like Judas, he used a prearranged signal to betray Tyndale.

What a perverse way to betray Jesus. A kiss is a sign of affection. A father gives his baby girl a kiss at bedtime. A mother gives her son one last kiss before he leaves home. A couple kiss at the end of their wedding. There's something precious in a husband and wife giving a kiss to each another in their golden years. The same God who gave us hearts for love gave us lips for kissing. The Greek verb for love, *phileo*, also means "to kiss." The sheer cruelty of this betrayal makes us want

to scream across the pages of time, “*Judas, that’s not what a kiss is for!*” Such a kiss was a common greeting back then, even among men. Judas uses it for the diabolical purpose of identifying in the night shadows that Jesus is the one they sought. As part of the inner circle, Judas knew exactly where to find Jesus far from the crowds.

Jesus knew of Judas’ plot and seeks to prick his conscience one last time, “*Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?*” Yet, Judas wasn’t the last one to betray Jesus. In pulpits this morning ministers are preaching and though there may be a cross in the sanctuary, many don’t believe Jesus is God, that He died for our sins, or rose from the dead. They’ve betrayed Jesus.

The disciples had a very human reaction. “*When those who were around Him saw what would follow, they said, ‘Lord, shall we strike with the sword?’ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, ‘No more of this!’ And He touched his ear and healed him.*” Isn’t that a normal response to being betrayed? To fight back, to defend yourself. Most of the disciples asked first, “*Lord, shall we strike with the sword?*”

John’s Gospel tells us that Peter swung his sword first and asked questions later. He sprang into action, but he was a better fisherman than swordsman. No doubt he was going for the center of the man’s head but caught his ear. Remember Peter had promised to die for Jesus. Maybe he’s trying to save face, but violence is never Christ’s way.

Can you imagine the momentary agony that this man felt? Blood pouring from his head, perhaps screaming in pain, dropping to his knees, writhing on the ground. Peter, looking at once both triumphant and horrified. Chaos ensues and then Jesus steps in. A sharp rebuke to Peter. A gentle touch to the man’s ear. Sudden, fleeting calm. Luke as a physician noted that it was the right ear. It’s Jesus’ last miracle before the cross, a miracle for an enemy.

Peter nearly plays into the mobs’ hands. They’d come with clubs and swords, ready for a fight. But Jesus is God’s lamb. He didn’t need Peter to fight for Him. He could have called all of the armies of heaven. Later the Savior told Pilate, “*My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.*”

This miracle is very important. It shows that Jesus loves and will heal even His enemies. It also protected His disciples. They’re no match for an armed mob. And it protected Jesus from any accusation that He was plotting an insurrection and demonstrated how utterly opposed He is to wrongful violence. It ends any attempt to hinder His progress toward the cross. By performing this miracle, Jesus showed that His purpose is to bring healing, salvation and His willingness to suffer betrayal and injustice for God’s glory.

J.C. Ryle (**picture**) points out the Church has always blundered when it’s picked up the sword. We’re not to attempt to force people to accept Christ or change their hearts by pressure. Our strategy is not conformity, but regeneration. That’s Christ’s work. It’s the Spirit’s work, not ours.

When Jesus said, “*this is your hour, and the power of darkness*” He’s referring to the hour when evil men have their way. It’s the hour when angry men called for blood and cruel soldiers carried out their evil plots. It’s Satan’s hour when he’d kill the Lord of glory and triumph. But it’s just an hour, a limited amount of time. In our world today, it seems like it’s Satan’s hour. We must remember it’s a limited amount of time. Even the hour that seems to be under the power of darkness is still God’s hour and under His control.

Each of us, too, has a choice to make. Will we go through life *pretending* like Judas, *fighting* like Peter, or *yielding* to God’s perfect will, like Jesus? Will it be the kiss, the sword, or the cup?

2. Our Lord faced the pain of denial. “*Then they seized Him and led Him away, bringing Him into the high priest’s house, and Peter was following at a distance.*” Peter makes a good whipping boy. We often forget that it was Peter who got out of the boat when the others were clinging to the sides. That night when the others disciples fled like scared rabbits, Peter follows. At a distance, but he still followed while they fled. How do we explain his triple denial?

Peter denies Jesus immediately. It’s just a servant girl. It’d be similar to the maid at a motel or a cashier at Taco Bell. As soon as someone asked if he was a follower, Peter claimed that he didn’t know Jesus at all.

Peter denies Jesus fearfully. Maybe he’d sensed that things weren’t going to turn out well for Jesus. We know Peter has a wife. Maybe he’s thinking of his family. The consequences for sticking with Jesus weren’t just going to be social, but judicial as well. He caves into cowardice with the pressure.

Peter denies Jesus unconvincingly. But no one is buying it. Maybe he could have pulled it off if hadn’t been known to be the spokesman for the disciples. Even his accent gave him away. The third accuser wouldn’t let it go. He was insistent that he had the goods on Peter, that he talked like a Galilean.

Peter denies Jesus totally. It wasn’t once or twice. Three strikes and you’re out. It wasn’t only men who heard his denial, women heard it too. And he denied Christ three different ways. First, he said that he didn’t know Jesus. Then, he explicitly disavowed that he was a disciple. The third time he pretended he didn’t know what they were talking about. Later, he could never say that it was just a misunderstanding and that he’d really never denied Jesus. No, Peter denied Christ as thoroughly as anyone could.

Peter denies Jesus grievously. His was a very great sin. He was supposed to be the rock, now he's sand. Peter did this after many warnings, after repeated encouragements to pray. He denied the only God who could save Him.

We will always fall when we are spiritually unprepared. Jesus had warned Peter that he'd fall, but he didn't believe Jesus. The Bible repeatedly warns us of the deceitfulness of sin. Somehow we think we'll be the exception.

Jesus urged Peter to pray and be prepared. He chose sleep instead. Prayer wasn't a priority. Is being prepared a priority for us? Most of us are more faithful in brushing our teeth than spending time in God's Word. Being prepared isn't a spiritual marathon. Yet, many go out unarmed and then wonder why they so easily deny the Lord by losing their temper, or griping or even lying. The test of our discipleship is our witness to the world, not our promises to God. Peter didn't deny Jesus when he was at church, but when he was out there. The test of our faith isn't how we act before a friend of the cross, but what we do and say before the enemies of the cross. The test of our faith is what we say and do when we're under pressure to take a stand for Christ.

Jesus never gives up on His own. *"And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how He had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly."* What kind of look do you think Jesus gave Peter? Anger. Irritation. I don't think so. Disappointment and hurt, but eyes filled with love.

It broke Peter's heart and he repented. So, why is this account of Peter's denials recorded in Scripture? I believe to underscore two great facts: the weakness and sinfulness of even the most prominent saints; and, the greatness and abundance of God's love and grace toward those who fail. For those who are walking with the Lord, Peter's failure warns us to be careful lest we fall. Then, for any who have fallen, it holds out the hope of pardon through God's abundant grace if we will only turn back to Him.

Restoration requires repentance. We can only have time to touch on some aspects of repentance. First...**There is a remembrance of God's Word.** *"Peter remembered the saying of the Lord."* Repentance begins when we remember God's Word. What does the Lord say about what I've done? That's the issue. Our tendency is to minimize our sin. God's Word though is the final authority. It tells me that I've sinned.

There is a conviction of our sin. Jesus' look penetrated Peter's conscience. He didn't have to say a thing. Peter was deeply convicted. He didn't make excuses or rationalize. Conviction acknowledges God is right and I'm wrong.

There is a godly sorrow over sin. This will vary with the seriousness of the sin and the personality of the sinner. When our consciences realize we've sinned against the Savior who loved us and died for us, we'll mourn over our sin. We won't be flippant or blow it off.

There is appropriation of Christ's sacrifice for our sin. Jesus had already begun to suffer for Peter's sin as He endured abuse at the hands of sinners. His sacrifice was completed on the cross, where Jesus cried out, *"It is finished."* We can't atone for our sins by sorrow or penance. Christ fully paid the penalty we owe. We can only appropriate Jesus' sacrifice to cover our sins.

There is appreciation of God's abundant grace. Christ's look not only conveyed the pain He felt at Peter's sin, it also communicated His great grace. Peter remembered the word of the Lord, which included the fact he'd be restored because of Jesus' prayers for him. What amazing grace – Christ chose Peter, knowing he'd fail Him! His grace saved us and it keeps us unto the day when we'll be with Him forever. Christians believe in and praise God for His grace as the only basis for forgiveness. Restoration begins with repentance and trusting again in God's grace and mercy.

Satan lies to us, telling us that failure is final. The gospel is full of hope. We need to tattoo on our souls that there's hope for anyone who will repent of their sin and run to Jesus. No matter how bad we fail, the cross is more than enough. C.S. Lewis (**picture**) was right: *"Though our feelings come and go, His love for us does not. It is wearied by our sins, or our indifferences; and, it is quite relentless in its determination that we shall be cured of those sins, at whatever cost to us, at whatever cost to Him."*

Chinese evangelist Wang Ming Dao (**picture**) was imprisoned for his faith, but under torture, he renounced Christ and was released. Afterward he lived with such torment of his soul that he'd walk the streets saying, *"My name is Peter; my name is Peter. I've denied my Lord."* Soon, Mao put him back into prison. This time for 18 years. Wang Ming Dao said every day in prison he woke up and sang the hymn by Fanny Crosby: *"All the way my Savior leads me; What have I to ask beside? Can I doubt his tender mercy, Who through life has been my guide? Heav'nly peace, divinest comfort, Here by faith in Him to dwell! For I know whate'er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well."*

At first the guards tried to silence him. When they weren't able to succeed, they resignedly put up with his singing. Gradually, as the years went by, they gathered at the opening of his cell to listen as he sang of God's faithfulness. Eventually, they began to ask him to sing and teach them the words of the song. That's the impact of one who repents and walks faithfully with the Lord. Often the boldest believers are those who know they're the biggest sinners.

3. Our Lord faced the brutality of abuse. Even with our legal system we know there are incidents of police brutality. Can you imagine if there were no restraints? Evidently, Jesus was left with a group of soldiers who were to guard Him until the formal session of the Sanhedrin. Unrestrained power is a terrible thing. They indulged in some abuse at the expense of their prisoner. They knew He was supposed to be a prophet, so they used that to mock Him.

Many of us have been bullied. Sadly, sometimes we've taken part in bullying. It's not just a guy thing. If you've seen *Mean Girls* (picture), you know girls can be just as brutal. A mob will descend into lower levels of cruelty than an individual with a bully mentality will normally do when acting alone.

Christianity is always good for a joke among the godless. The grim irony was that their abuse fulfilled Jesus' prophetic words, *"He will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon."* The torture had begun. Jesus stood in regal silence while dripping spittle and blood.

It's a reminder and an encouragement to us. You and I will never endure any ridicule or abuse for our faith that Jesus doesn't understand.

Picturing this scene turns my stomach: "How could anyone treat another human being, let alone the Lord Jesus, like that?" Yet, as Spurgeon points out, we need to lay aside our indignation and bring forth penitence, because we all have hit our dear Savior in the face with our sin. It was because of our sin that He endured the abuse of these sinners and went willingly to the cross.

4. Our Lord faced the mockery of justice. It was a sham of a trial. Notice that they don't have any charges, but seek to get Jesus to incriminate Himself. Can you imagine being dragged into the police department and being asked what you have done with no charges? It's a kangaroo court.

Not all of the members of the Sanhedrin know of the event. Some seats were empty. There's a satisfaction as a bloodied Jesus stands before them. They sneer, eyes red with rage. They feel totally in control, but are deluded. Their hour of power when darkness reigned was in truth His hour of power.

Everything about this trial was illegal by their laws. The trial took place at the high priest's home, not the temple. Jesus is tried without a defense. He's accused of blasphemy without actually blaspheming by pronouncing the divine name. The verdict came in one day when two days were required for a capital trial. He was tried on a feast day and at night. Contradictory testimonies nullify the evidence. A pronouncement of guilt by the high priest violated the normal order of beginning with the least senior member. It's "God in the hands of angry sinners" to put a perverse twist on Jonathan Edward's famous sermon.

Jesus seized the occasion to again confirm who He was with a formal declaration of His deity. Three of His divine titles were showcased before the Sanhedrin: *Christ, Son of Man* and *Son of God*. His calm demeanor in spite of His illegal treatment is a judgment against these wicked men. A criminal or sinner would have screamed about his rights being violated, but Jesus bore all of this abuse silently before God, as a lamb led to the slaughter.

Jesus tells them that *"from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."* This brings together several Old Testament prophecies. Again, Jesus is asserting that He's both Lord and Christ, the ruler of God's eternal kingdom who will judge the nations. He uses the phrase *"Son of Man"* in reference to Himself. The Jewish leaders knew exactly what He was saying. They respond by asking, "Are You the Son of God, then?" They got the connection because they knew the Old Testament. They knew that the Son of Man, Messiah, is God's Son in a unique way that no one else is.

Jesus turns the tables on them. They thought they were sitting in judgment on Him. He lets them know that He is sitting in judgment on them! He answers their question about being the Son of God by literally saying, "You say that I am." He's saying "yes, I am," but He's not saying it straightforwardly. He doesn't want to respond to men who are asking out of evil motives.

There's a touch of irony here. Clearly, the Jewish leaders knew that He meant "Yes," because they concluded, *"What further need do we have of testimony? For we have heard it ourselves from His own mouth."* It's not a misunderstanding but hardened unbelief.

Jesus' next step toward the cross is to stand before Pilate the Roman governor with the damning evidence that He's the Messiah, the reigning King of all. It's why Pilate writes on the placard placed over His cross, "The King of the Jews."

Conclusion: *"the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."* It will be place of judgement. Someday Jesus will sit as Judge. Slick lawyers, like Hugo Black, can't get someone off. We've all seen miscarriages of justice. Perhaps the most famous in recent years was the O.J. Simpson (picture) murder trial where he was acquitted of murdering his ex-wife, Nicole and her partner, Ronald Goldman, despite compelling evidence.

These Jewish leaders heard Jesus' words, but wouldn't submit to Jesus as Lord. That's always the issue: *How do we respond to the testimony that we've heard concerning Jesus?* There is only One who is fit to be judge, God Himself in the

person of Jesus Christ. The Bible says that Jesus will return and all will stand before Him when He acts as Judge. God allowed Himself, in the person of His Son, to be put into the hands of angry sinners. Our Lord willingly went to the cross, but now He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

If you're running your own life, you're not in submission to Jesus as Lord. If you don't repent and yield to His lordship before you die or before He returns, He will be your Judge, He will sit in judgment on you and it will be eternal judgment!

Today He is the Lamb of God who suffered as the penalty due to sinners. There is coming a day when rebellious sinners will cry out to the rocks, "*Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?*" (Rev. 6:16-17).

The bottom line is that you must choose. Will Jesus be your Savior or your Judge? Trust Him as your Savior in this life or He will be your Judge in the next. Which will you choose?