

Jesus: Condemned by Religious Leaders and Denied by Peter

DARRELL DELANEY

There is a sinking feeling when you see a headline that says: Man freed after twenty years, wrongfully convicted. You wonder how a courtroom designed for truth could miss it that badly. You also know smaller versions of that moment in your own life. On this episode of *Groundwork*, we follow Jesus into a courtroom where the verdict is decided before the evidence, and into a courtyard where fear outweighs loyalty. Along the way, we will see how easy it is to put Jesus on trial in our hearts, and to shrink back from identifying with him; and we will also listen for the mercy that meets us there, next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in the Lenten series. We are walking the stations of the cross as kind of a gospel pilgrimage here. So, last time we joined Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and at the moment of betrayal. We watched him pray, submit to the Father's will and allow himself to be arrested. Today, we are going to follow him into the place of judgment with two stations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Stations three and four on this program of the fourteen stations of the cross. So, first Jesus is condemned by the Sanhedrin—that is the third station of the cross—then the fourth station is Jesus being denied by Peter. So, inside, religious leaders sit as judges over Jesus; outside, a disciple tries to blend into the crowd and distance himself from Jesus, but let's go to Luke Chapter 22 and begin to listen to his account of Jesus before the Sanhedrin.

DARRELL DELANEY

Picking it up at verse 66, it says: At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and the teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. ⁶⁷“If you are the Messiah,” they said, “tell us.” Jesus answered, “If I tell you, you will not believe me, ⁶⁸and if I asked you, you would not answer. ⁶⁹But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.” ⁷⁰They all asked, “Are you then the Son of God?” He replied, “You say that I am.” ⁷¹Then they said, “Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is striking that Luke notes also the time of day. It is daybreak. Light is returning to the world, but the hearts in that room are dark; they are already closed. We are told that Jesus is led before them, like a defendant, but the verdict was decided before he even got into the room. They are not actually weighing evidence. They are just kind of hunting for a charge...just some way to pin on Jesus what they already believe to be true; you know, they ask a question and it sounds sincere: If you are the Messiah, tell us. They are not actually sincere at all, Darrell, are they?

DARRELL DELANEY

No, they are not; and what is interesting to me, Scott...this just occurred to me...it is very interesting to me that that question: If you are the Messiah...sounds very similar to the question that Satan asked Jesus in the wilderness. If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread. Throw yourself down from here. Bow down and worship me, if you are who you say you are; and it is interesting that even though these people are not Satan, they are saying something similar that...so, what Satan had said: If you are the Messiah, tell us; but Jesus exposes that truth. He is like: If I tell you, you are not going to believe me anyway, so what are we doing? Why are you even asking me that? And he borrows the language from Daniel about the Son of Man being seated at God's right hand. So, when he doesn't deny it, he says: You say that I am because that is what you just said; but then, that is the evidence they thought they needed to convict him of blasphemy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the next program, with Jesus before Pilate, we will see something very similar, where he is asked: Are you the Son of God, and so forth; and Jesus basically says: Hey, you said it; not me. "We don't need any more testimony!" They say. "He just said it with his own lips! He is self-condemned."

Now, we know, Darrell, something about...you mentioned in the introduction to this program, about courts that sometimes get it wrong. Once in a while, you see somebody...a story of somebody...who got exonerated by DNA evidence later on. The person was innocent, but you know, there was pressure in the courtroom...there was fear...bias...a rush to close the case...and they end up with the wrong verdict. Just a courtroom and rules and laws and robes and gavels...they just cannot guarantee justice; and that is really what is happening here; only, since we are dealing with the actual Son of God, it is really magnified here.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, I was thinking about this, and I was thinking about maybe there are quieter versions that are happening in our everyday lives, Scott. I mean, think about how quickly we form verdicts about people we barely know, like a teenager who wears a certain style of dress, has tattoos or something; or a co-worker with different political views and the political yard sign is different than the color of the one I have in my yard; or the family who sits in your "pew" in church. In our minds, we wrote stories about these people before we have asked a single question, if we could just be honest about that; even though it is not a real courtroom with wood-panels and gavels, like you just said, it is functioning like one because our decision is made before the truth has a chance to speak into it. It is really sometimes a thing we are notorious for doing, but we don't always admit it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, true enough; and really, the deeper shock of this scene that we just saw in Luke 22, and it is repeated in the other gospels, is that humans actually do this with Jesus. Whether they know it or not, they are putting God on trial. This is the one the prophets announced. This is the one the scriptures anticipated. Now, they are sitting above him instead of under him. They treat his presence as a threat to *their* authority instead of the fulfillment of their hope; and you know, as you mentioned earlier, Darrell, we maybe are not sitting on the Sanhedrin; we are not sitting on that religious council, but we can slip into our own version of putting Jesus on trial. I mean, it happens all the time when we encounter a teaching of Jesus, but we quietly decide: Nah, I like this part of what Jesus said, but not that part. He tells me to forgive my enemy, to care for the poor, to tell the truth about our sin, and Jesus stands before us like a witness, directing us to these things, but we kind of turn a deaf ear and say: I will make up my own way, thank you very much.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, those things are illogical; and those things are unreasonable; therefore, I don't want to do them. This reminds me of the Thomas Jefferson bible...have you ever heard of the Thomas Jefferson bible, where he cut out the things that were not reasonable, did not make any sense or could not be proved by empirical evidence. So, we do that. We contort ourselves around the hard scripture and the hard sayings of Jesus that actually call us to sacrifice...call us to obey...call us to surrender...call us to love our enemies and things of that nature; and those things are actually, I think, not just difficult for us to do, but impossible to do from the flesh

standpoint...from our own will. We need God's actual strength to do those things, and it is easier to dismiss than it is to surrender.

There was a time in my life that I made, if I can be honest, even as a pastor I made Sabbath kind of optional because it just felt inefficient to kind of stop from working. I mean, I have a lot to do...who doesn't have a lot to do...but then the Lord actually convicted me of this. It was a gentle reminder that we need to know that what he did was not optional. We need to make sure that when Christ speaks that his word rules over us and not we rule over it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Lent is a time, really, when the Church lets scenes like this read us. I remember somebody saying once: Have you been read by a good book lately? These scenes read us, we don't just read them. The third station of the cross here invites us to encounter a hard question: When and where have I set myself up as judge over Jesus; over his word; over his claim on my life? When have I already decided against obedience before I even listen? Those are hard questions to face and answer, Darrell; but our hope is that the one standing silently in that courtroom in Luke 22, is the same one who will carry our misguided verdicts to the cross; the innocent one, who was condemned as guilty; he is the one who will forgive us when we mess up. That includes council members, pastors, missionaries, ordinary believers like all of us. Jesus will forgive us, but we have to be determined not to let that happen over and over.

Well, in our next segment, let's step outside now into the courtyard and stand near another fire where the pressure looks different. There, we will see Peter, the disciple who wanted to be loyal, but he found that his courage collapsed. Stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we have stood in the council chamber and watched Jesus get condemned. Now, let's move outside the court to the courtyard. Inside, Jesus is on trial; outside, Peter's discipleship is being tested. We are going to go back to Matthew now, Matthew 26, beginning at the 69th verse.

DARRELL DELANEY

It says: Now Peter was sitting in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. ⁷⁰But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. ⁷¹Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow [here, he] was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷²He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" ⁷³After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away." ⁷⁴Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. ⁷⁵Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not too long before...hours before...Peter had said to Jesus: Even if all fall away, I never will. I will die with you. Now, he is sitting near the fire, close enough to see what is happening, but far enough to feel that he can be safe, and then a servant girl recognizes him; then another one, and then the group: He speaks like somebody from Galilee. He's got an accent to his speech. So, their questions get sharper and the pressure climbs. Peter's responses intensify from a vague dodge to an oath to calling down curses; and Darrell, that is just what happens when fear takes the driver's seat, huh?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, Peter got into this self-preservation mode, and that seemed to take over and override his earlier devotion. It is easy to be devoted to Jesus when you are standing right there in front of Jesus. It is easy to confess the Lord when you are going to church and you hear your favorite worship song or whatnot; but when you are out in the middle of the courtyard, if you will, if the courtyard is your home, if the courtyard is your neighborhood, your work, your job, your campus; those places are actually where the real trial happens for your heart...for your devotion...and Peter failed this test because he overestimated his ability to stay faithful. Because he went from: How can I be faithful to how can I get out of this alive, under that kind of pressure. Isn't that interesting that that shift happened?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and I like what you said a minute ago, that the courtyard here can be most anywhere in life. Maybe you are at work and, you know, people in the breakroom...Christian faith is getting rolled out as a punchline. Somebody jokes that only weak people need God. And you are sitting there; you feel a nudge to speak a calm word about Christ and what he means to you, but you also feel how costly that could be in the culture of your workplace and with your coworkers. So, what do you do? You stay vague to protect your reputation, or do you quietly own your allegiance and speak up? Unfortunately, I think we know that sometimes, Darrell, that we choose to just let it ride...let it go...don't rock the boat. I don't want these people looking funny at me. That is a denial in a courtyard, too.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; that is a public courtyard. Another public courtyard would be while you are having a family gathering where all of you who are there and you are the only one who follows Jesus. This has happened in many families that we know. Somebody launches into a story that trashes the Church or mocks Christians or something like that, and the room is warm and you love these people, but you don't want to start a fight; you don't want to rock the boat; and it feels easier to kind of chuckle and move on. Rather than you saying: That has not been my experience, actually; my faith in Christ has actually held me together; because if you say that, now you are rocking the boat; now you are confronting; and now you could risk being canceled or ignored or cursed out, or whatever it is—disrespected; and that is inconvenient and that is painful; and that is a modern courtyard that you might have to speak up in that God could be challenging you in. Moments of tests where we treat our connection to Jesus as something to be seen or something to be hidden will be the choice that we need to make in that situation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there are private courtyards, too; and maybe nobody else is around; nobody is watching you. It is just you and the Lord, but you have a computer browser window that is open and you are tempted to take a look at a website you probably should not look at. You are filling out your taxes, and well, you could finesse this a little bit...you could fudge this a little bit...get a little bit more of a refund. They don't have to know that I got that extra money. The government doesn't know. Or somebody has hurt you, and you are on social media maybe and you can retaliate with some really cutting words. In those moments, Darrell, when we betray Christ in us...when we betray Christlikeness...that is the same way of saying: I don't know the man, as Peter did, because we are living as though Jesus' lordship does not touch every area of our life.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and even though we are not verbally saying: We don't know the man, we are acting in a way that is contrary to the relationship of knowing the man. So, Peter actually can give us language for the shame that happens after we have those choices we are not proud of, because it says he went outside and he wept bitterly; and I know, myself included, many believers know that feeling when you look back on a conversation and you realize that you didn't want to be labeled, so you dodged the mention of Jesus, and you felt a compromise in your spirit and you felt a knot in your stomach, and you are like: Man, I messed up; I disqualified myself. But I think one of the gifts of this station of the cross is that it keeps Peter in the story, Scott. It does not airbrush his failure, and it doesn't leave him there; but later in the story, Jesus will actually

redeem him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, as he denied Jesus once, twice, a third time...more and more intensely, he must have known in his heart that he is doing exactly what Jesus said in the upper room he was going to do...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But Jesus said: You are going to do that three times before the rooster crows. Roosters used to crow at different times during the night, and somehow, it was when that rooster crowed that it hit Peter like a sledgehammer: I just did exactly what Jesus said I would do, *when* Jesus said I would do it, *how* Jesus said I would do it; and I swore to him I wouldn't, and it kills him. It kills his spirit; he weeps.

We are going to see in the next segment of this program that Jesus is full of grace, and he will restore Peter. We will go to a scene in a minute...in the next segment here...that will show that; but you know, these things happen. It can happen to all of us. We have seen it happen to friends; we have seen it happen to ourselves.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, I remember when I was on college campus and there was a young believer who over time slipped into some patterns that did not fit their identity in Christ. One night, it caught up with him. Alone in a dorm room, he realized how far his choices had drifted from what he said he believed. A trusted mentor listened to him without flinching, prayed with him and pointed him back to Jesus; but that illustration teaches us that failure is real, but Christ does not have it to be final in us. So, this station invites us to name where we feel the pull Peter felt, but also to actually own up to the things that bring us closer to the mercy that met Peter.

In our final segment, we want to talk about how we want to bring the council and the courtyard together and ask how these scenes speak into our lives today. We will also listen to the scriptures that hold together both our failures and Christ's faithfulness. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Darrell, we have now, in this program at stations three and four in our stations of the cross series, we have watched Jesus stand before the Sanhedrin and be condemned...he was condemned even before they brought him in the room. We have heard Peter deny knowing Jesus, and then wept bitterly outside in the dark; and these two stations, Darrell, show two ways that people can turn away from Christ: Some resist Jesus with subtle opposition; others stumble under pressure and fear; and Darrell, most of us, if we are honest, have traces of both of those things in our own stories...in our own walks of faith.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; it kind of reminds me of the parable of the sower with the different soils. There is some seed that is choked out by the cares of the world; there is some seed that lands on hard ground, and some seed that actually lands and grows; and it is interesting how the resisting of the temptation...the temptation to resist him is still in us, and the pressure to move away from him out of fear is still in us; and the good news is that John, the apostle, wrote about this and he knows how to get this right; and it is in 1 John Chapter 1:8, 9. It says:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he [being God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

So, John doesn't carve out a category for people who never fail. He says if we claim to be without sin, we are not telling the truth; and just like the denial that Peter did around the fire, we can deny [and say] that we don't have any sin in us, but that is not going to work for us. We just need to come clean and be true about it, and then we will receive the forgiveness that comes after from a God who is faithful and just.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and this is a Lenten series here on *Groundwork*, and Lent is, if nothing else, that time to be honest about our sins. Not to dodge them...of all times...not during Lent. We have seen the sin of the Sanhedrin in condemning Jesus, really without any evidence. We have seen the sin of Peter in denying Jesus; and we have talked about in the previous segment how we do this in our lives; sometimes with our words, sometimes through our actions, that we are just denying Jesus. We have to own up to that; we have to confess our sins; and when we do, we will be forgiven. We mentioned this in the previous segment: So, Peter denies Jesus three times but now let's listen to how Jesus handles this a little farther down the line, on the other side of the resurrection, in John Chapter 21, where we read these words. They had breakfast on the beach, you may remember:

¹⁵When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." ¹⁷The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, around the fire before this, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times; and in this restoration, he is asked does he love the Lord three times—three questions, right? So, he is being restored by Jesus; and the great theologian Lesslie Newbigin said this, that you know you're God's, not just because he called you to him, but if he sends you on mission, then you know if you are one of his. So, Jesus is sending Peter on mission: Feed my sheep. I am giving you a responsibility to continue. Your failure happened, however, my calling on your life is not canceled because of that failure. That is music to my ears, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, again, we have said this in the previous segment, Darrell, we have all had seasons of our life where we drifted in our faith; where we have hidden our faith; we have compromised our faith; we have denied Jesus by our words or our actions. But if we confess our sins, Jesus will restore us, over and over, as he does Peter here.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a beautiful thing for us to be restored by God, who has not given up on us. I love that Jesus is willing to condescend to our level. So, I was thinking about how these stations of the cross that we have been talking about this entire episode, come home to us. I thought of three things, and the first thing is to name where you denied Christ. I think instead of us pretending that we are always standing firm, that we are always perfect, that we always get it right, we have had these courtyard scenes in our own lives, and the ones we just read can search us and we can ask the question: Where have we stayed silent to protect our image or preserve ourselves or didn't want to rock the boat; and where have our choices said: I don't know the man, even if our lips never did. So, when we bring that stuff into the light, like 1 John tells us to, it is not wallowing in guilt, it is agreeing with the truth that grace can actually work in us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, name where you have denied Christ—takeaway number 1. Takeaway number 2: Move from judging to following Jesus. So, we saw in that Sanhedrin room...in that courtroom...people sat above Jesus; they rendered a verdict, but in discipleship, we need to do the opposite. We sit under Jesus; we sit under his Word; and we let that Word that we dig into here on *Groundwork*, we let that Word search us; and we listen when the Holy Spirit corrects our attitudes, our grudges, our use of power, our saying half-truths instead of robust truths. So, we want to get to the point of saying: You are the Son of God; you get the final word in my life; it is you, Jesus, who I want to follow.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we've got name where you deny Christ; moving from judging Jesus to following Jesus; and the third thing...this one really hits me...trust that Christ's mercy is deeper than your worst moment. I know I am a perfectionist...recovering perfectionist...and I mean, Peter is having this moment where he understands that his tears are not the end, and our tearful nights do not have to be the end either, because our God is the one who is actually bringing us to the point where we turn back to him. We are not meeting a cold judge, but we are meeting a risen Lord by the fire, who asks: Do you love me? That is an invitation to follow again.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, Darrell, you and I have both been involved in prison ministry, and one of the things that we say over and over to our inmate students in the Calvin Prison Initiative: Don't let the worst five minutes of your life define your life. There are new beginnings with Jesus, so don't let those five minutes when you committed that terrible crime be the last word.

So, as we trace the stations of the cross, we are not just tracing a sad story, we are following the Savior, who knows our hearts, our fears, our failures, but whose grace is always stronger than our shame; thanks be to God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we continue our journey reflecting on the stations of the cross with Jesus before Pilate and a subsequent beating at the hands of Roman soldiers as they mocked him and crowned him with thorns.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Groundwork is a listener-supported program produced by ReFrame Ministries. They've got a website, too: reframeministries.org; check it out for more information and to find more resources to encourage your faith. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney.

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