

Dave Scholes

Mark

Prayer of Illumination

Almighty, gracious Father, since our whole salvation depends on our true understanding of your holy Word, grant that our hearts — freed from worldly affairs — may hear and understand your holy Word with all diligence and faith, so that we may rightly discern your gracious will, cherish it, and live by it with all earnestness, to your praise and honor, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Bucer)

Text: Mark 14:53-72

Mark 14:53-72 **ESV**

⁵³ And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. ⁵⁴ And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. ⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. ⁵⁶ For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷ And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, ⁵⁸ "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.' " ⁵⁹ Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰ And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" ⁶¹ But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" ⁶² And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." ⁶³ And the high priest tore his garments and said, "What further witnesses do we need? ⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?" And they all condemned him as deserving death. ⁶⁵ And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophecy!" And the guards received him with blows.

⁶⁶ And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, ⁶⁷ and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." ⁶⁸ But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. ⁶⁹ And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." ⁷⁰ But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." ⁷¹ But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this man of whom you speak." ⁷² And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

Introduction

Modern man often presumes, to borrow a phrase from Lewis, to put 'God in the dock.' That is, putting God on trial, judging God and His Word. Presuming to take the place of authority over God Himself and telling God what is up and what is down, what is right and what is wrong. Modern man pretends to do this — I say pretends, because to *actually* do this would be impossible. But the point is that human beings have become so accustomed to being at the centre of everything; to being the authority over everything; to being the masters of everything, that we have forgotten that to God, we are but dust.

Here in our text today, we have a very concrete example of people presuming to put God in the dock. The religious authorities are literally putting Jesus on trial, in a secret court, the judgment of which has already been determined by these wicked men. But God cannot be placed in the dock unless God wants to be placed in the dock, and Christ here turns even the most blasphemous of accusations — including that the Son of God could blaspheme — and turn it into a step towards the very means by which He would save the world.

The text is once again structured into a sandwich of sorts — Mark has been doing this a lot — and the bread here is Peter, with Christ in between. The contrast is between two men, who suffer two tests, One passes His test, the other fails. Christ, put on trial by the highest religious authorities in the land, suffers as a faithful witness; Peter, put on trial by a serving girl, denies Christ and is a faithless witness. In fact, that word, 'witness' occurs seven times in various forms in our text. It's a key theme.

For us, we will see the good example of Christ, and we should seek to follow that example when trials come. We will see the poor example of Peter, and we should seek to not follow that example when trials come. But we will also see that all of us is Peter, all of us have failed and will fail tests and trials in the future. If we just look at Christ as good example and Peter as bad example here, we will end up in moralism. But if we look to Peter as representative of us, and then look to Christ who passes His test *for us*, then we have hope: trust in Christ and His perfect record, and His faithful witness becomes yours. Then you can aim to follow His example free from fear of failure or condemnation.

Explanation of the Text

Let's walk through it together.

Peter's Distant Following

In **verse 53** we read that Jesus is led to the high priest by those who arrested Him in the garden. The sanhedrin — the highest Jewish authority — are present, along with their high priest. They have finally come together to see their schemes against Jesus come to fruition. Ever since Mark 3:6 this has been their aim.

Verse 54 tells us that Peter was following Jesus, albeit at a distance. Perhaps we can see Peter's tension here: devoted enough to follow; weak enough to stay distant. Isn't that the experience of us all from time to time? We want to follow Christ, but something keeps us from following wholeheartedly, from following closely. One commentator puts it this way: "Peter has forsaken a discipleship of costly following for one of safe observation."[^] He follows to the courtyard of the high priest. The trial is taking place upstairs as verse 66 tells us, and Peter is sat with the guards and warming himself by the fire.

That's the first part of the sandwich: Peter, following but distant.

Jesus In The Dock

In **verse 55** we come to the trial of Jesus. A few things to note about this trial. First, according to their *own* rules, this was being conducted illegally. In Jewish law, trials were meant to take place during the day; guilty verdicts required a second-sitting the following day, to ensure fairness. Remember that these people had already broken Sabbath laws back in Mark 3 in order to conspire against Jesus. So they aren't going to let

some rules get in the way now.

It says that the Jewish leaders were working hard to find people who could witness against Jesus so that they could put Him to death — they have decided the punishment before the case is heard. There's one lesson against so much in modern culture. Notice that even though this was a secret trial, happening at night, *immediately* following the secret arrest of Jesus, but even so, there were 'many' there who bore false witness against Him. This is a conspiracy alright; the false witnesses had been lined up prior to the arrest and were ready to go. But even with all the scheming and conspiring and planning and trap-laying, they couldn't lay a finger on Jesus.

Even though they found many such witnesses (**verse 56**), they couldn't get their stories straight. Their testimonies did not agree.

In **verse 57** more witnesses stand up and bring another false accusation in **verse 58**: *"We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'"* **Verse 59** tells us that even about *this* they couldn't get their facts straight. Jesus had *predicted* the destruction of the temple, but He hadn't said that *He* would be the One to do it. The irony is that through God's sovereign will, the Temple would be destroyed, and Christ would be the New Temple through whom people would be reconciled to God.

Nonetheless, these witnesses still couldn't get their testimonies to agree. Perhaps like Babel, God confuses His enemies' ability to communicate and conspire together.

In **verse 60**, the high priest has evidently had enough. If you want something done right, you'll have to do it yourself, and he steps up in their midst and confronts Jesus Himself: *"Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?"* But Jesus remained silent (**verse 61**). He is fulfilling Isaiah 53:7: *"7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."*

The high priest goes more direct in **verse 61** asking Jesus, *"Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?"* Now, we need to spend a moment considering what is meant in this question. For us, 'Christ' means Jesus, the eternal Second Person of the Trinity. But for them, the title Christ or Messiah did not have that expectation. The Christ or Messiah (the words mean the same thing) was the political hope, the new David who would

rescue and restore Israel *as a nation*. The claim to be the 'Christ,' even the claim to be a Son of the Blessed (Son of God), is not in itself blasphemous given that context — the title Son of God could have meant the new Davidic King. So the high priest is not necessarily asking Jesus if Jesus thinks He is God, but the way Jesus answers the question leaves no doubt.

He responds in **verse 62** with the famous statement "I AM." He reveals Himself here in the same way God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush. He says that He is the Son of Man, but that He will be seen seated at the right hand of Power (Power here means God), and coming with the clouds of heaven. Here, Jesus unequivocally, entirely clearly, claims to share glory and power and position with God. Jesus says that He might be the One on trial now, but they will see Him return and judge them.

In their eyes, this is a most heinous blasphemy. And as a result, the high priest tears his garments (**verse 63**), and asks the court for their verdict. The all condemned Him as deserving death (**verse 64**). Left to their own devices and questions, they couldn't get a guilty verdict. Jesus Himself, ever in control, even in charge, voluntarily gives Himself up in His confession to be the Son of Man from Daniel 7, who will be seated at the right hand of God, who will return with judgement, who is the Lord of Psalm 110, and who is even the I AM.

They couldn't condemn the living Word of God with His words. Know this: every human being who presumes to put God on trial is doing so only because God is letting them do so. Everyone who accuses God of evil is borrowing from God's standards to make that judgement. Everyone who uses words to accuse God of injustice has God to thank for that breath. Christ really is in control.

The crowd starts to spit on Jesus, to cover His face so He can't see, and to strike Him (**verse 65**). Then they mock Him while they hit Him: 'Prophecy!' In other words, you think you're so powerful, prophecy who it was that hit you. If you're the Son of God you should be able to do that much! Isaiah 50:6 is fulfilled: *"6 I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting."*

The great irony is that in demanding a prophecy, they are fulfilling it. In mocking and beating and spitting on Christ, they are in the middle of a tragic, but nonetheless fulfilled, prophecy.

This whole scene is filled with irony.

The sanhedrin presume to wield the law whilst Jesus is put on trial for breaking it; but it is the sanhedrin who are breaking the law while Jesus upholds it.

The testimony the sanhedrin need is not provided by the many false witnesses they have coralled for the purpose, but by the innocent Jesus Himself.

Jesus is — for a time — on trial before the sanhedrin, but soon they will stand before Him when He comes into His Kingdom and returns in glory to judge the living and the dead.

The sanhedrin mock Jesus's ability to prophesy, but His prophecies have come true.

And perhaps the greatest irony of all is that in charging Jesus with blasphemy, the high priest is the one who blasphemes, because Jesus really is who He says He is. ^^

Peter in the Dock

We now turn back to Peter, who is also facing a trial of sorts. But instead of being in front of the weighty judges of the sanhedrin, he is below in the courtyard and it is a mere servant girl who confronts him (**verse 66**). She recognises him as someone who had been with Jesus (**verse 67**), but Peter denies it in **verse 68** by saying that he neither knows or understands what she means. He's saying there can be no mistake, I have no idea what you're talking about. He then further distances himself from Christ by leaving the courtyard and heading out into the gateway. Denying Christ verbally, and distancing himself from Christ physically. The rooster crows for the first time.

Then, in **verse 69**, the servant girl finds him again, and this time tells the crowd around them that Peter was one of the men who had been following Jesus. In **verse 70** he once again denies it. The bystanders press the matter further, and Peter denies it a third time in **verse 71**, invoking a curse upon himself and swearing that he doesn't know Jesus. The curse and oath is effectively saying: "may God punish me if I am not telling the truth." He fears man rather than God. But another great — and gloriously merciful — irony here is that God will not punish Peter for his cursing and false swearing, but will forgive Peter, because Christ bore the curse in His place.

Verse 72 tells us that immediately after Peter's third denial, the rooster crowed a second time, and Peter remembers Jesus' prophecy that he would deny Christ three times before the rooster crows twice. The realisation of what he's done hits him: he breaks down, and weeps. Again, Peter represents frail sinners like us: I didn't realise it would go this far; I didn't mean for this to happen; the sin crept up on me again. And all of a sudden, the weight of grief for your sin hits you.

Peter's story is left unresolved by Mark — for now. But in Mark 16:7 we will see that Jesus still goes ahead of Peter and will meet him. John's gospel tells us of Jesus's three-fold restoration of Peter. For weak and foolish disciples — like Peter, like you, like me — He is just and faithful to forgive. If He can forgive Peter *his* faithlessness, He can forgive you if you confess your sin to Him, repent of it, and trust in Christ.

Conclusion and Application

The amazing thing about the trial of Christ is that even though He was led like a lamb to the slaughter; even though He didn't defend Himself; even though He was conspired against; even though many people bore false witness about Him in order to kill Him; even though He was abandoned by His followers at the most trying point of His life... God was in absolute control of all of it. As we said, without Christ's own words, there would have been no grounds on which the sanhedrin could have condemned Him. Christ gave them what they needed to send Him to the cross, because the cross was always His destination. They are sinning in condemning Him to death, but in condemning Him to death they are pawns on God's chessboard, ensuring that Christ gets the victory over sin and death. Only by condemning Him can it become possible that *their* sins could be forgiven! God is *that* powerful, *that* in control, *that* kind.

And the bold and self-controlled confession of Christ before the high priest is compared with the withering denial of Peter before a mere servant girl. Christ is silent in the midst of false accusations; Peter pours out lies in response to a servant girl's truths. Christ was the ultimate humble man. He was also the ultimate courageous man. He came to serve and tell the truth. Humble servanthood, and a bold stand for the truth. Especially in the face of false accusations and intense persecution. Peter on the other hand was often the one to make bold claims (often true claims!), and bold steps (walking on water, cutting off the servant's ear in Gethsemane), but when boldness was really called for, he

withered. Peter, the chief apostle, fails, and this shows us that none of us is beyond the ability to fail and falter. We can and must be honest about this, because if we deny the possibility of this sort of thing, we will fail to be on guard against it as Jesus so often warned.

This is also why we must not look at this story as *merely* two alternate examples to follow. Christ sets the perfect example, as always. Peter tends to represent broken, misguided, faithless and faltering disciples, like us. If we just try to follow Jesus's example, we, like Peter, will also fail. But if we look to Jesus as the One who endured the unjust judgement and condemnation of humanity, who then endured the perfect, full and final judgement of God, *for us*, then, when we look to that Jesus and that work, we are freed from the burden of self-righteousness. We trust in His work for us, not our ability to persevere for Him. And in doing so, we are given the strength and motivation to give our lives wholly to Him in response. And that will look like ever-increasing obedience. That will give saints the strength to follow Jesus's example, just as Stephen did, just as James did, just as Paul did, and just as Peter ultimately did: men who gave their lives for Christ as He gave His life for them.

So in response to this gospel; in response to His work for us, what are we to then do? Once we have fixed our eyes on Christ, once His grace has mastered us, how are we to live in light of this text?

The first thing is to realise that being associated with Jesus is a dangerous thing. It always has been, and will continue to be in our lives. And the enemy will go after you like he went after Peter, so as our Lord taught us, we are to be on guard, we are to stay awake. Peter's threefold denials shows us the enemy's tactic.

First, Peter pleaded ignorance. He said in **verse 68**, "*I neither know or understand what you mean.*" This could look like different things today. From the Christian who knows so little of their Bible that they are constantly forming God into *their* image, and therefore are able to distance themselves from anything that might resemble the real Christ. The vast majority of Christians in the West live with this kind of 'ignorance is bliss' mentality. Because when you learn something new, you have to change! When you get corrected, you have to change! When you figure out that the way you've been doing it isn't the way the Bible says to do it, you have to change! It's easier just not to know, or at least to pretend you don't know, like Peter. But Peter did know, and we know much more than we sometimes admit to. Don't succumb to the temptation to plead ignorance. Don't avoid the truth just because it's

hard to hear.

When in conversations with unsaved people and they say "Aren't you a Christian?", they probably aren't going to try and have you killed if you say yes. Nonetheless, there will be temptations for small compromises in line with Peter's first denial. If someone brings up some controversial text about the 'Old Testament God,' it might be tempting to say something like, 'well, that's not the God I know.' Some might be tempted to say, "The God I know would never command Israel to kill the Canaanites." At that point, you've given up the beachhead. At that point you're already under siege. If you give that ground up, not only are you being unfaithful to God and His Word, but you're actively inviting pressure. They do what the servant girl did and gang up on you.

In **verse 69**, Peter is accused of being 'one of *them*.' Which he again, denies. We're not like *those* Christians. This is seen most clearly in those who say they like Jesus but not the church. It's a distancing not just from Jesus, but from His people. I worship in my own way. I don't need to go to church, I can worship at home.

In **verse 71** Peter out and out denies Christ. And that is the end goal of the enemy who schemes against you. It will start with a small test, but will end up with a major denial if you don't stand your ground.

And so the lesson is to be bold like Jesus. When someone asks you a question about your faith, you don't hide your light under a bushell, much less deny your Lord. When they say to you, You don't really believe that stuff about male headship do you? The answer is Yes. You don't really believe that when God commanded the conquest of Canaan He was acting righteously, do you? Yes. You don't really believe that marriage is for one man and one woman do you? Yes. You don't really believe that [fill in the blank] do you? The answer is yes.

Be bold like Jesus, but not in a self-reliant way. In a way that sees His boldness for you and rejoices in the fact that whatever happens to you here, because He went to the cross and rose again, so you too will taste new and everlasting life if you do not deny Him.

Let's pray.

Footnotes

^ Edwards, *Mark*, 442.

^^ Paraphrasing Edwards, *Mark*, 449.