

Scripture: Mark 14:53-72

From Gethsemane to the Cross:

Part 2- Bearing Witness Under Persecution

Beloved in Christ, when Jesus was in the upper room with His disciples, He shared with them many things. One of the things He said was, *“if the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you . . . Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you”* (John 15:18,20).

There is unending joy and life in following Jesus. But following Jesus also involves a cost; and that is, a willingness to suffer unfair treatment, ridicule from the world for your belief and commitment to Christ. But in the day of trial, such as the church and Christians are facing today, will trust Jesus to stand with us and hold us?

How will we respond?

We see the sharp contrast here between our Lord Jesus and His disciple, Peter. Both are on trial at the same time: Jesus, before the high priest and Peter, before a servant girl of the high priest. Both bear witness under persecution and yet, we see

1. Jesus’ faithful witness
2. Peter’s unfaithful witness

1. Jesus’ faithful witness (vv. 53-65)

Jesus is led away as prisoner and brought to the high priest. The high priest was Caiaphas at the time (John 18:13-14) who presided over the Sanhedrin.

As you may recall, the Sanhedrin was the ruling body of the Jews. There is Jesus – alone -- in chains and on trial before a 71-member council consisting of chief priests, elders and scribes.

His trial is sandwiched between another trial going on -with one of his disciples, Peter. It’s not looking good for Peter. He is following Jesus -- but at a distance. This is to say that he is distancing himself from the Lord Jesus. He is in the courtyard of the high priest, observing Jesus. He’s playing it safe.

It’s late into the cool night.

Peter is waiting around, seeing what’s going to happen, enjoying the cozy warm fire. He mingles in with the rest. He is sitting with servants, the same officers of the Sanhedrin who arrested Jesus and will strike Him with the palms of their hands (v.65).

Jesus is on trial, taking our place. A trial always involves witnesses, at least two corroborating witnesses who agree. Here the chief priests and all the council look for witnesses against Jesus in order to put Him to death. Long ago they already decided on His death (3:6). Now they are seeking “testimony against Jesus to put Him to death” but they find none (v.55).

What does this tell you? This is a trial with trumped up lies! They gather their many witnesses against Him. This is nothing new – attempts to discredit Jesus, even today among His followers!

But then some of the witnesses recall what Jesus said earlier in His ministry. "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands'" (v.58). They misunderstand His saying and twist the meaning. Jesus was referring to Himself. His resurrected body, the church, will replace the temple.

But the point is *"not even then did their testimony agree"* (v. 59). They're fumbling for grounds but can't find any to accuse Jesus; to put Him to death.

Finally, the high priest himself stands up in their midst and questions Jesus personally, *"Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You"* (v. 60)? But Jesus keeps silent. Why does He keep silent?

His silence represents His innocence. His silence fulfills prophecy from Isaiah, *"He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth"* (Isaiah 53:7).

Yet, the Lord Jesus provides the testimony that they are looking for in order to put Him to death. How? What does He say?

See verses 61-62. *"Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?'"* Jesus openly affirms it, *"I am."* He replies with the very name of God: I AM. He affirms this with a reference to Himself as the Son of Man from Daniel 7:13. He says, *"And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."*

"And you will see" Him, the risen, exalted Son of Man. Jesus stands on trial before the Sanhedrin but the Sanhedrin will stand on trial before the Son of Man and be judged when He returns in glory! What a warning to our world – for all who do not repent and believe!

Jesus affirms before the entire council that He is the divine Son of God. Jesus bears witness to Himself. He bears witness to the truth. The testimony the Sanhedrin seeks is provided by Jesus Himself in the claim to be God's Son.

How does the high priest respond? *"Then the high priest tore his clothes, and said, 'what further need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think? And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death'"* (vv. 63-64).

They convict Jesus on the charge of blasphemy; that is, Jesus making Himself equal to God. Blasphemy was punishable by death (Leviticus 24:16). Had Jesus' claim been false, it would have been blasphemy, worthy of death. But He bore witness to the truth and they condemned Him. But in condemning Jesus, they condemn themselves!

By condemning Him, you see the loss of all restraint in verse 65. *"Then some began to spit on Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him, and to say to Him, 'Prophecy!'"*

Jesus did prophecy! Did He not say to His disciples, *"the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him...."* (Mark 10:34)?

This now is happening.

So why did Jesus provide them with the testimony that they were looking for to put Him to death? Because of His great love. There is no other way for God to accomplish salvation for His people than through the sacrifice of His only beloved Son. He, the innocent Son of God, came into the world to lay down His life for sinners. He pays the full penalty for sinners, being condemned – in the place of all who trust in Him.

He lays down His life – even for Peter, His unfaithful disciple. He needs salvation too! This brings us to verses 66-72

2. Peter's unfaithful witness (vv.66-72).

While Jesus is going through His trial before the high priest, a trial of a different sort is taking place below. Peter is on trial before a servant girl of the high priest. *"Now as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came"* (v.66).

She sees Peter warming himself by the fire. She looks at him and recognizes him as a follower of Jesus. *"You also were with Jesus of Nazareth"* (v. 67). Nazareth was looked down upon. It's like saying "You are one of those."

Peter has the prime opportunity to bear witness to his Savior and the Savior's love for sinners. Does Peter confess Him? No, he denies Jesus. He pleads ignorance. *"I neither know nor understand what you are saying."* How many of us see ourselves in Peter here? In our sin and weakness, we quickly become anxious for our own safety; concerned for the approval of others.

Notice Peter, he distances himself further from Jesus, moving to the porch; hardly a picture of boldness and courage in his witness. A rooster crows.

But this does not relieve Peter from further attacks. The servant girl sees him again, and now involves others who are standing near by. She says to them, *"This is one of them."* But he denies again his association with Jesus. Certainly they sense Peter's discomfort and keep on bugging him.

They are all hearing it now -everyone. And now those standing by say to Peter, *"Surely you are one of them"*. Peter's accent, His Galilean accent, was giving him away.

Peter is scared for his life. He becomes adamant – bold, not in his confession, but in his denial, *"then he began to curse and swear, 'I do not know this Man whom you speak'"* (v.71)! He does not even mention the name 'Jesus'. This is deliberate. Peter, Jesus' own disciple, is ashamed of Jesus, exposing Him to scorn! The rooster crows a second time. Then Peter remembers what Jesus said to him, *"before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times"* (v.72). Peter breaks down and weeps – thinking about it. This man needs God's grace and forgiveness in Christ. Is there that for him?

Bearing witness under persecution – Jesus is faithful, Peter is not. Yet Jesus is condemned to death so that Peter may be saved and live. He restores Peter, bringing him to repentance and faith in Him. You notice in Mark 16:7, the angel tells the women to tell the disciples – and Peter – that the risen Christ was going before them into Galilee.

Peter is mentioned separately because of this. And yes, Peter too will stand before councils and kings, and by God's grace, bear witness to Christ, the Savior and Lord under persecution!

Beloved, at the time when Mark wrote this gospel, the faith of his readers was being severely tried. Rome had adopted measures to stamp out the newly formed congregations of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter's denial was a warning to the persecuted congregation and to us that not even the best Christian or like here, the lead apostle, is immune to denying Jesus. But also it shows that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace! There is no other place where we can be honest about sin than in the church, because Jesus is the Head and Savior of the church. This is the place of God's grace!

Bearing witness under persecution means 'standing up for Jesus', not denying Him. We are not fulfilling our role as witnesses if we are more concerned about what the world thinks of us than '*showing forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light*' (1 Peter 2:9). We should expect the world to "revile and persecute . . . and say all kinds of evil" against Christ's disciples (Matthew 5:11). We should also not be surprised when the world observes our honorable conduct and good works, yet still speaks of us as "evildoers" (1 Peter 2:12).

It's a badge of honor to be known "as one of them" or 'as one being with Jesus.' That's how they knew Peter. And when you stand on trial before the world, remember that Jesus stood on trial for you and was condemned in your place. Trust Him. By His Spirit, He gives the strength, the courage to stand! Don't trade Christ for Satan, life for death, heaven for hell! When the world condemns you for your faith in Jesus, remember 1) in Christ you stand justified, 2) when Christ returns, all believers in Christ will be publicly vindicated; all others eternally condemned.

But being a faithful witness to Jesus, however, begins in our every day lives, in the small things – in places where we find ourselves. Being faithful witnesses of Jesus begins with our simple and ordinary actions and words. Living out our faith by living the life of Jesus in us.

Jesus says in John 16:33 "*In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*" Amen!