

88 Mark 14:53-72

Rock and Sand

Text

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

We have been working our way through the Gospel according to Mark for some time now. We have traced his ministry through three stages:

1. The Galilean ministry which is the most dynamic aspect of his ministry. He ministered tirelessly. He ministered to the crowds, teaching and preaching and casting out demons and healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, stilling the storms and walking on water.

2. The Journey ministry is the second phase of Jesus ministry where he focuses less on the crowds and more on his disciples. He gives three predictions of his suffering and death and resurrection. He is continually challenging his disciples notion of greatness in the kingdom of God.
3. The Jerusalem ministry begins in chapter 11 with Jesus triumphal entry. From that point on, aside from the cursing of the fig tree, there are no miracles. The context is all about confrontation. Jesus cleanses the temple and challenges the authority of the ruling class. They try again and again to trap him, but each time they are silenced by Christ.

Jesus leaves the temple for the last time and ascends the Mount of Olives where, in the longest teaching section we have in Mark, Jesus declares and describes the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. In chapter 14 he is anointed for burial by the woman with the alabaster flask. He then enjoys the Passover celebration with his disciples as he enters the last 24 hours of his life. It is a time of the sweet redefinition of the Passover and the promise of the coming kingdom as well as the bitter reality of betrayal and death.

Each of the disciples asks if it will be them. Judas leaves to do his dirty deed while Jesus and the rest go to the garden of Gethsemane for prayer. On the way he predicts that all will fall though they all deny it. In the garden Jesus experiences the first level of abandonment as he faces the most intense time of his life thus far alone in prayer while his disciples sleep. He experiences the second level of abandonment when Judas shows up with the arresting party and all of the disciples flee. That now brings us to our text this morning.

The Sand

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.

You can really see Peter's struggle here. At first he was ready to fight - so ready that he cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. But within the next couple of minutes he was on the run leaving Jesus in the hands of his enemies. At some point Peter stops and begins to question his actions. He turns around and follows at a distance. He is even able to make it into the court of the high priest. But notice that this renewed attempt is less than it was before. Edwards, observes that "Peter has forsaken a discipleship of costly following for one of safe observation."

The setting seems to be the house of the high priest. There was an outer door that opened into a courtyard. Aside from the front, the courtyard was surrounded by rooms. There may also have been an upper level. It appears that this house of the high priest was one of those houses since verse 66 describes Peter as "below in the courtyard."

There were many people gathered in this courtyard. Some of the guards of the arresting party were there. The usual house staff would be there, and many of the so called witnesses that were hastily assembled were there to be called upon. Peter was, for a short time, able to mix among this group without being noticed.

The Rock in the Storm

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.

The scene shifts to Jesus. Now begins the kangaroo court. Almost every aspect of this trial was illegal. Allow me to read a portion of Edwards' commentary where he addresses this:

According to the Mishnah, twenty-three members of the Sanhedrin were necessary to judge capital cases, with reasons for acquittal preceding reasons for conviction. In capital cases, a verdict of guilty required a second sitting for the following day. Both sittings had to take place in the daytime, and neither on the eve of Sabbath or on a festival. Witnesses were to be warned against rumor and hearsay. a charge of blasphemy could not be sustained unless the accused cursed God's name itself, in which case the punishment prescribed was death by stoning with the corpse then hung from a tree. As mentioned earlier, the chambers of the Sanhedrin were the Hall of Hewn Stones in the temple; there is no evidence that the Sanhedrin ever met formally in the house of the high priest.²

Thus, almost every aspect of this trial goes against the law. From the beginning these men were looking for a reason to kill him. For years now they have sought to kill Jesus, and still, in the midst of his trial, they have nothing of which to accuse him. They had no specific charge of which he was accused, on which basis they arrest him and subsequently try him. No, they arrest him without warrant and now they are in a desperate scramble to find something that they can get to stick. They bring forth witness after witness, and they all raise different things, not agreeing one with another. The only witness that comes close to matching is regarding his teaching on the temple. This also becomes the basis for their mocking of him while he is on the cross. But even this so called witness does not agree well enough for it to stand in court.

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.

They are working on a very limited time table. A capital trial during a feast was illegal. Moreover, the people loved Jesus, and if this carried on into the morning, not only would the people riot over their favorite rabbi, but the illegal nature of the whole thing would be plain to everyone. They had to finish this up and get him into the hands of Rome before it was too late but the witnesses were not cooperating! They could not agree on anything. They had nothing on Jesus.

Caiaphas, the high priest, stands. Frustrated by their inability to make progress, Caiaphas now takes it upon himself to interrogate Jesus. "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" He had to somehow get Jesus to incriminate himself. "Answer!" But Jesus says nothing.

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.

From all of his previous teaching and actions, it was clear that Jesus claimed to be the Christ. Caiaphas now asks Jesus if he is the Christ. Finally, a question to which Jesus can give a positive response. Everything thus far had been lies and a twisting of the truth. False witness after false witness came forward. It was beginning to look like there would be no conviction. But if there is no conviction, there will be no death. If there was no death there would be no atonement. This is what Jesus came for. It is clear that even with Jesus in their custody, this is something that Jesus enters into willingly. Though they took him by force, it is all in his control.

Jesus is the one who provides what is needed. He is not ashamed. He is not afraid (not of their opinion). He is bold and steadfast. He accepts the title of Christ and the high priest tears his clothes. But a messianic claim was not a capital offense. They may judge it to be wrong, but one could not be put to death on that charge. They believed in a coming Messiah, so obviously somebody had to be the real deal. You can't have it as a policy to put to death anyone who claims to be someone whom you actually think is coming. The death penalty came through a different claim.

Caiaphas slipped two questions into one. "Are you the Christ?" That is the first question. "Are you the Son of the Blessed?" That is the second question. It was not always the case, but in some circles of Jewish thinking these two titles were linked together. Caiaphas links them here in hopes that he can catch Jesus with this loaded question. Although Caiaphas may have thought he was being tricky when he loaded the question, in reality the question was perfectly accurate. These two titles, which in most Jewish thought were completely distinct, were actually held by the same person.

Notice the title, "Son of the Blessed." The Jews, out of fear of using God's name in vain, would often avoid using it altogether. This is called a circumlocution. You can see it in many places in scripture where, for instance, the kingdom of God is referred to as the kingdom of heaven.

Caiaphas is asking whether Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus' answer is unequivocal. In fact, he does Caiaphas one better saying, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." Jesus' answer draws both from Daniel 7 and from Psalm 110.

Daniel 7 speaks of the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven and being presented before the Ancient of Days. This is not just some human military leader that will rescue Israel from Rome's power. This is an exceedingly high description. Nobody is described as coming on the clouds, or riding on the clouds except God himself. Psalm 110 makes that link even more explicit:

The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."

The original language here is the "YHWH says to my Adonai." Notice how the psalmist uses the term Adonai:

Psalm 8:1 O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

Psalm 97:5 The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth.

Psalm 114:7 Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob,

Psalm 123:2 Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us.

Psalm 135:5 For I know that the Lord is great, and that our Lord is above all gods.

Psalm 136:3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever;
Psalm 147:5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.

The psalmist often uses Adonai as a name of God. It is unmistakable in Psalm 110. What Caiaphas asks, and what Jesus affirms, is nothing short than a claim to be God. It was at this point that the high priest tore his clothes and they all condemned him of blasphemy and worthy of death. Although the high priest tore his clothes as a sign of grief, you can be assured that he was delighted by this turn of affairs

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.

Now begins the physical aspect of his passion. Ridicule is hard enough to endure, but his restraint under the physical abuse is amazing. A strike in the face is one of the most personal attacks. It is almost instant anger when you are hit hard in the face. Even when there is no ill intent, a hard hit in the face is an instant anger button. So the fact that the guards were taunting him and striking him in the face and yet he did not sin, that is amazing. Jesus remains firm. Despite the threats he is solid.

You see, as Edwards notes, "Gethsemane was the prelude to Calvary, for in a valley beneath the city Jesus allows his soul to be crucified; on a hill above the city he relinquishes his body." (Edwards, 436). As Jacob did typologically in the OT and so earned the name Israel which means "Wrestled with God" so Jesus as the perfect Israel wrestled with God in the garden of Gethsemane. And having done so, these men will not deter him. Though they mock him, he is solid. Though they threaten him, yet he does not shy away from proclaiming who he is. Though they beat him, yet he remains steadfast.

Sand in the Rain

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.

Our attention once again shifts to Peter out in the court. His renewed efforts to be loyal have collapsed in one horribly embarrassing failure. It is a mere servant girl that approaches Peter. It is not the council of the Sanhedrin. She somehow recognizes him and says so. Peter melts. *Petros* seems to exhibit less rock-like properties than sand-like. At the slightest rain he begins to shift and slide away. "I neither *oida* nor *epistamia* what you mean." *Oida* is a more theoretical knowledge and *epistamai* is more of a practical knowledge. Thus Peter denies knowing Jesus in practice or in theory. He now physically moves from the warmth of the fire toward the gate. And the rooster crowed.

The servant girl, however, is not content to let it go. She watches and thinks and reaffirms her initial assessment, "This man is one of them." And again Peter denies it. Others now begin to join in. While Jesus was inside being falsely accused, Peter was being rightly accused. While Jesus stood silent before his pseudo-witnesses, Peter can't help but talk. The more he talks the clearer the truth becomes. The others take notice of his Galilean accent and affirm the servant girl's observations. Peter now denies in the most explicit way possible, he begins to invoke curses on himself swearing that he does not know this man. And the rooster crowed.

While Jesus was steadfast to affirm his true identity, Peter is careful to never even mention Jesus by name. The contrast between Jesus as the rock of our salvation and Peter as the ever shifting sand of the sea could not be more clear. Jesus is being led out just as Peter finished his denials. Their eyes meet, the rooster crows. All the predictions come flooding into Peter's mind and he breaks down and weeps.

Application

I think that there are a few of things that we can take away from this passage by way of application. Christ was right to say, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Peter gives it a good try, but he fails miserably. James Edwards comments on the fall of the disciples saying that we, as they are guilty of "sins of weakness and irresoluteness rather than sins of intention. We do not plan on sinning, but neither do we hold the fort when we ought" (Edwards, 428). Peter traded "costly discipleship for safe observation." How many Christians live as Peter? How many evangelicals choose a life of safe observation rather than costly discipleship?

We see the stark contrast between the steadfastness of our Lord and the waffling of his most ardent disciple. Jesus is our Rock and our salvation. He is our fortress in which we take refuge. Peter is only the rock when he lost his life in Christ. Thus these two observations come together in the gospel.

Cheap grace is the safe observation. But the costly grace, as Bonhoeffer said "is the gospel which must be sought again and again." It is in the gospel where we come to the end of ourselves and confess before God and his angels that "I am not good enough!" "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling." Have mercy on me a sinner."

Gracious Lord, incline thy ear;
My requests vouchsafe to hear;
Hear my never-ceasing cry;
Give me Christ, or else I die.
Wealth and honor I disdain,
Earthly comforts, Lord are vain;
These can never satisfy:
Give me Christ, or else I die.
All unholy and unclean,
I am nothing else but sin;
On thy mercy I rely;
Give me Christ, or else I die.

Thou dost freely save the lost;
In thy grace alone I trust.
With my earnest suit comply;
Give me Christ, or else I die.
Thou dost promise to forgive
All who in thy Son believe;
Lord, I know thou canst not lie;
Give me Christ, or else I die.

notes

1 James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*. (The Pillar New Testament Commentary). (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, 442).

2 James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*. (The Pillar New Testament Commentary). (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, 443).