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THE SILENT, SINLESS SUFFERER AND FAILING, FORGIVEN FOLLOWER

Mark 14:53-72

(12 of 15 in a series through Mark 10-16)

December 9, 1989 was a dark and memorable day in my childhood. The Kentucky men's basketball team had gone on probation the year prior, meaning that for two years we couldn't participate in any post-season tournaments, and our games couldn't be televised live. But we'd hired a coach named Rick Pitino, who exuded a lot of confidence, and the belief was that he could turn the program around. And in that first year of our probation, we got a pretty good test of seeing how good or bad we were. On that Saturday in December, we were playing the defending champion Kansas Jayhawks. If you wanted to watch the game, you had to stay up late—getting permission from your parents if you happened to be my age—and watch the game on tape delay. But what little boy from Kentucky wouldn't want to stay up to watch us play Kansas?

Well, we pressed the whole game, and Kansas broke it easily. At halftime, Kansas had already scored eighty points on us, which if you watch college basketball, it's often rare for a team to score eighty points in an entire game. At the final buzzer, Kansas scored 150 points and beat us by a mere fifty-five points. At one point, things got so bad that after we were out of time outs, Kansas's coach looked at Pitino and asked him if he wanted Kansas to use one of their timeouts for our sake. Again, it was a tough one.

But I remember talking the game over with my dad, and he stressed that it wouldn't always be this way. Our coach, he told me, was making us play the style we needed to play to win, and once we mastered it and got better talent, we were going to be good. And he was right. Three years later we were in the final four, and three years after that, we won the championship. On that day, as bad as it looked, I just needed to remind myself—it won't always be this way.

I think that's what comes through in Mark 14:53-72. Once more, the scene is a painful one as Mark is walking us toward the death of Christ at what feels like a snail's pace. The events of this chapter take place immediately after Jesus is arrested. Those who arrest Jesus take him to the palace of the high priest. Most likely they take him into an upstairs area in the palace. The reason we can say that is because verse 66 tells us that Peter was *below* in the courtyard—an area which would have surrounded the palace.

As Jesus is there before the priest, the chief priests, scribes, and elders are there as well. We have noted before that this group of seventy men (along with the high priest, making it seventy-one total) made up the religious ruling body in Jerusalem known as the Sanhedrin. Now, Mark notes that they were "all" there, but I don't know if he means the entire seventy-one-person group or if he simply means all the groups who made up the Sanhedrin were represented by their respective group. Either way, there was a sufficient group to make a ruling against Jesus.

Now, we already know that Jesus won't get a fair hearing because this group has been seeking to arrest him and have him put to death for a while now, and Mark confirms that nothing about this trial is just. The group was seeking testimony that might condemn Jesus to death, but they couldn't find any. They did get some to bear false witness against him, but even their testimony didn't agree with each other. The best charge they could come up with was some saying that Jesus said, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands" (v. 58), but Mark tells us that even here their testimony didn't agree. Also, we know that Jesus never said *he'd* destroy the temple but spoke of others destroying it, and even when he mentioned others destroying it, he wasn't speaking of the literal temple but of his own body. This is somewhat the equivalent of hearing someone say, "There's more than one way to skin a cat" and then being charged in court for abusing cats.

In the end, they could come up with nothing except Jesus acknowledging that he was indeed God's promised Messiah—which was true. But they accused him of blasphemy, spit on him, slapped him, mocked him, and hit him. It is an unjust and terrible scene. But, as I've noted, there's one thing that Mark helps the reader see throughout this unjust scene—it will not always be this way. The first way we see this is in the ironic reality that the sinless one is condemned.

The sinless one is condemned

One of the glorious truths (and absolute necessities) of the gospel message is that Jesus died as the sinless one. In other words, Jesus didn't die on the cross because he deserved to die like every other human who has ever lived. He alone is perfectly righteous. He alone is sinless. This is why Paul can say in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Christ knew no sin, yet he died as the sin offering so that his perfect righteousness might be credited to us, even as he bore our sin. That's the great exchange that occurs in the gospel.

Well, one way that Mark shows us Jesus' sinlessness is through this sham of a trial. As he notes throughout, there is absolutely nothing that they can point to as a charge against Jesus. The closest they come in the series of false witnesses that come against him, is misunderstanding his use of the temple as a metaphor for his own body. And what's ironic about that is that they were seeking to destroy Jesus, which was the very thing he was talking about when he'd said, "Destroy this temple and I'll rebuild it in three days."

When they finally did condemn him, saying he was deserving of death, is when the high priest questioned him after Jesus had been silent, asking him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" (v. 61). That is, he was asking him if he indeed was the promised Messiah the Old Testament prophesied would come as God's eternal king. Jesus answered, "I am" (v. 62), and the response of the high priest was to tear his garments, ask "What further witnesses do we need?", and declare he had committed blasphemy. And then Mark tells us, "And they all condemned him as deserving of death" (v. 64). They condemned him for acknowledging who he genuinely is in response to a direct question about his identity. What an unjust trial, again, showing Jesus' sinlessness.

But amidst the injustice of this scene and the painful condemnation of the sinless one, Mark helps us to see that things will not always be this way. First, as Jesus responds to the question of whether or not he is the Messiah, he not only says, “I am,” but also adds, “And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (v. 62).

Now, when Jesus says this, he’s not just making up imagery off the top of his head, thinking, “It would sound cool to say this.” He’s drawing from two Old Testament texts. The first is Psalm 110:1. There, the Scripture says, “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” When Jesus says, “Seated at the right hand of power,” this is the text he’s referencing. Moreover, we know that Psalm 110:1 is talking about the Messiah because Jesus himself has made reference to this text, questioning his opponents at one point saying, noting that the Messiah is David’s son but also his Lord according to this text (again, because David says, “The LORD says to my Lord,” referring to the Messiah).

The other text Jesus is referencing is Daniel 7:13-14 where the prophet Daniel saw a vision of the Messiah, and he describes this vision, writing, “And behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

Therefore, when Jesus answers this way, he’s clearly affirming that he’s the Messiah. He’s the one who will reign over God’s kingdom forever. He will reign at God’s right hand, and he’ll be given dominion over all the world. Now, you know what another word for “dominion” is? Authority. To possess dominion is to possess authority. And you know what Jesus said after he rose from the dead and met his disciples on the mountain in Matthew 28:18? He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” In that moment, he was saying that he reigned over all things. He was saying, “I’ve been given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve me,” just as Daniel had seen in that vision. That’s why he tells us to go make disciples of all nations.

So, note what is happening here. The high priest and all the religious leaders were pronouncing Jesus condemned. That is, they were saying to Jesus, “You are under the judgment of God. God is against you. You’re the object of his burning wrath.” And Jesus was saying, “Just wait a few days, and you’ll see.” And sure enough, on that Easter Sunday morning, God overturned the verdict of the Sanhedrin. He raised Jesus from the tomb, declared this is his righteous king, and gave him dominion and a kingdom so that all peoples might serve him. He gave him all authority so that Jesus reigns over the world at the right hand of God right now. Talk about vindication. That’s what Jesus was saying to the high priest—he was saying, “It won’t always be this way.”

But Jesus was also saying more. Sometimes, when the Old Testament prophets make prophetic declarations of the coming Messiah, it looks like things all come at once. What I mean is that the prophets may talk about the Messiah coming and dying while also defeating all of his enemies.

And we know that Jesus does both of those things, but he does them in two separate comings. Now, the same is true here with the fulfillment of Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14. You might read that and think that Jesus would walk out of the tomb as God's appointed king, and in that moment his enemies would all be destroyed. But the reality is that this happens in two different moments. Jesus is installed as God's king (as the *God-man*) at his resurrection, but his kingdom will not be fully consummated until his return, when he finally destroys every enemy. He comes and deals a fatal blow to the serpent and brings salvation to his people through his death and resurrection, but the serpent will only be fully and finally defeated and his people fully and finally saved at his return.

I mention that because this vision Daniel has of the Son coming in the clouds and receiving all authority is fulfilled as Jesus is raised as Lord and Christ. But this imagery of him coming in the clouds is also picked up by New Testament writers to refer to something that will only happen at Christ's return, as Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."

And it's in that moment that Jesus will judge his enemies. He can say in his first coming, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). But don't be deceived, upon his return, he'll certainly judge his enemies.

If we understand that, then Jesus' saying points out even greater irony. As he stands in the high priest's palace, he is the one on trial. He's the one who is stands to be judged by this man. But one day the high priest will see Jesus coming to consummate his reign, and on that day Jesus will be the one on the bench, and the high priest will stand before him in the dock to be judged. Again, we need to understand in Jesus' answer to the high priest that he's not shying away from who he is. He's declaring that he'll one day judge this man who judges him. As we've noted, things will not always be the way they are on this day as Jesus is on trial. Mark helps us to see in this lowest moment that a reversal is coming.

But there's another scene taking place as Jesus is up in the high priest's palace, unfolding in the courtyard below. In this scene down below, we'll see the bold one betrays his Lord.

The bold one betrays his Lord

Now, when I say that Peter is bold, I'm not being sarcastic, knowing that he's about to deny Jesus. He really is. I believe he shows more courage than most of the disciples. The last time we saw the disciples, they were all fleeing from Jesus as he was being arrested. But Peter decides to double back. We're told in verse 54 that Peter keeps his distance, but he does want to go and at least be somewhat close to Jesus during his trial to keep his eyes on what's going down. That seems bold and somewhat courageous to me. And yet, it simply sets the stage for the lowest moment in Peter's life.

As Peter is in the courtyard around the high priest's palace, it is already dark. We know it would have been hard to recognize anyone under the blanket of darkness, which is why Judas had to go and kiss Jesus, identifying him as the one to be arrested. But it's also getting cold as the sun has gone down, so Peter goes over to a fire to warm himself. And that's his first mistake. With the flickering fire, it not only provides heat but light, enough light that it lights up Peter's face, and a servant girl of the high priest sees him and recognizes him. She looks at him and declares, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus" (v. 67).

Now, this would be an ideal time for Peter to show his allegiance to his Lord, but instead we're told, "He denied it, saying, 'I neither know nor understand what you mean'" (v. 68). And with that exposure, Peter realizes he needs to be more discreet. Therefore, lest anyone else recognize him, he goes "out into the gateway" (v. 68). But this persistent servant girl—who was probably running to and fro, carrying out the duties expected of her—found herself also out in the gateway, and she saw Peter again. And this time she didn't just speak to Peter but to those around him, saying, "This man is one of them" (v. 69).

Now, this put Peter in a bad situation because now if he was going to deny being associated with Jesus, he was going to have to address these bystanders that the servant girl was accusing him in front of. And he did deny it, but as I noted, this was to his detriment. And here's why. Peter, being from Galilee had a particular accent that would have been easily identified. So, as he speaks to the group, denying any connection with Jesus, his accent betrays him. And sure enough, as he begins speaking and denying it, the bystanders say, "Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean" (v. 70).

What can Peter do now? He's trapped. And so he panics and doubles down (or triples down) on his denial, as Mark tells us that he "began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know this man of whom you speak'" (v. 71). In other words, he was saying something like, "May I be damned before God if I'm lying. I don't know that man."

And at that moment, the rooster (who had crowed after Peter's first denial) crowed again, and at that moment Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times," and he broke down and wept (v. 72). Peter had been so determined to prove Jesus wrong when his Lord had prophesied Peter's denial, and yet here he was—without excuse, with no one to blame but himself, and with no recourse but to weep for his betrayal of his Lord in this crucial moment.

But we can look at this tragic scene and also say, "It won't always be this way," can't we? You see, Jesus had predicted Peter's denial, but when he predicted that his disciples would all flee, he'd added, "But after I am raised up, I will go with you to Galilee" (Mark 14:28). And notice what happens when Jesus is raised. The angel appears to the ladies visiting the empty tomb that morning and says, "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee" (Mark 16:6-7). Now, why would he single out Peter specifically? Well, it's because of

this incident where Jesus had foretold his denial. He was now saying to Peter, "I've not forsaken you, and you're not hopeless." Peter would find forgiveness.

But it's not just that Peter would find forgiveness and be restored. He'd go on to lead the church in Jerusalem. It was Peter who would stand up and preach on the day of Pentecost, proclaiming Christ's crucifixion and resurrection so that 3,000 were added to the church. It'd be Peter who'd take the gospel to Cornelius and see the Lord bring believing Gentiles into the church. It was Peter who would serve his Lord faithfully to the point of death. In other words, there'd come another day when identifying with his Lord would cost him his life, and he would not deny his master then. The one who weeps at the end of Mark 14 is the one who would go on to hear, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

And the same is true for us. If there's an idea in your head that you can't be forgiven or that, even if forgiven, you're relegated to second-class citizenship in God's kingdom, that voice is the devil. Christ takes the Peter of Mark 14 and turns him into one who would later write: "But rejoice insofar as you share in Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:13).

When we read Mark 14:53-72, the thought that should run through our minds is, "It won't always be this way." And it wasn't. The one condemned would be vindicated on that Easter Sunday morning. The one judged will return as judge. And the one weeping over his sin would one day hear, "Well done." So, as we strive to walk in faithful obedience to our Lord today, let's fix our eyes on the hope to come, remembering that even in the difficulties of our lives, "It won't always be this way." And that's true because of the life, death, resurrection, and coming return of our Lord. So let's give him thanks now. Amen.