

Series: Mark's Gospel

Title: The Courtroom before The Cross

Text: Mark 14:53-65

Date: March 21, 2021

### Verse 53

In Mark 14:53, Mark transitioned to describe Jesus' trial. He said, "They led Jesus away to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes assembled." The individuals before whom Jesus stood comprised the Sanhedrin. Mark did not give the name of the high priest who took part in Jesus' trial, but Matthew identified the man as Caiaphas (Matthew 26:57). The Sanhedrin constituted the highest ruling local court in first-century Judea. The assembly was modeled after Moses' practice in which he used 70 elders to assist him in making decisions.<sup>1</sup>

As Jesus stood before His accusers, the plots of the religious leaders in Mark 3:6 and 11:18 came to fruition. The chief priests, elders, and scribes were finally getting what they wanted. Their pesky enemy would soon be dead. Though they may have felt they were in control of the situation, sovereignty was working behind the scenes. Jesus' prophecies from 8:31, 9:31, and 10:33-34 were being fulfilled.

### Verse 54

As Jesus was dragged in front of the Sanhedrin, "Peter followed him at a distance." Remember that Peter was a source for Mark's gospel. He provided Mark with the details we see in our passage. He was strategic in depicting himself as following Jesus from a distance. He wanted to provide a warning for first-century readers, as well as for readers of all generations.

Jesus had previously warned Peter concerning a temptation to deny Him (Mark 14:27-31). It is not by coincidence that the passage which follows our current passage would give a narrative concerning Peter's failure (Mark 14:66-72). The gospel writer wanted to encourage his readers to learn from the apostle. Many were being tempted to back down from their commitment to Jesus because of Roman persecution. Peter's later failure was due, in large part, to his unwillingness to boldly associate Himself with Jesus. Readers needed to stand on guard.

There was, however, a degree of merit in Peter's actions. While others completely forsook Jesus, the apostle at least followed "right into the high priest's courtyard" (Mark 14:54). The place was an enclosed area between buildings. It would have been open to the sky above.<sup>2</sup> Most likely, the high priest's residence was nearby.<sup>3</sup> Peter demonstrate a degree of nerve, even a level of devotion, to follow Jesus into such an enclosed space. He surely took a risk in order to be somewhat close to our Lord. We should remember that, although Peter did deny Jesus, he still exhibited a level of faithfulness at Jesus' arrest.

Despite the small glimpses of loyalty, Mark's intent was to depict Peter as being unwilling to fully associate with our Lord. Peter was fearful, so he kept his distance. He was, as A.T. Robertson had said, "not bold enough to take an open stand with Christ as the Beloved Disciple did, and yet unable to remain away with the other disciples."<sup>4</sup> Mark wanted persecuted Christians to not give into fear. His words were meant to warn them of being wishy-washy in their faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferguson, 246.

<sup>2</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 100.

<sup>3</sup> Schnabel, 376.

<sup>4</sup> Robertson, 386.

Peter's folly was further displayed through Mark's depiction of him "sitting with the servants, warming himself by the fire" (Mark 14:54). Imperfect middle voice verbs were used in the original language of the text. The verbiage conveyed continual activity in the past. Mark meant to portray Peter sitting for a good while with the handlers who had arrested Jesus. The picture was of Peter making himself at home with ungodly people.<sup>5</sup>

Peter surely needed to learn a lesson about the the importance of keeping the right type of company. By getting too comfortable with the wrong crowd, the apostle conditioned himself for spiritual failure. He needed to learn the lesson Paul would later share in one of his letters — "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals'" (1 Corinthians 15:33). Scripture continually warns of the danger of getting too close to sin (2 Samuel 11:1 and Psalm 1:1-2). Proverbs 27:12 says, "A sensible person sees danger and takes cover; the inexperienced keep going and are punished."

### **Verse 55**

Verse 55 said, "The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they could not find any." The original language of the text contained technical legal jargon from the first century, indicating that the trial was a formal one.<sup>6</sup> Mark's description of the Sanhedrin "looking for testimony against Jesus" used an imperfect active verb to depict a continual action in the past. Apparently, the leaders spent some time searching for incriminating evidence against Jesus. They had been trying to find a way to bring charges against Him since Mark 12:12, yet they found no way to do so. They needed hard evidence "to put him to death," since the Sanhedrin did not have the legal ability to carry out capital punishment.<sup>7</sup> They needed causation to recommend the death penalty to Rome.

### **Verse 56**

In their attempts to generate a guilty verdict, a number of members from the Sanhedrin concocted lies. Mark said, "For many were giving false testimony against him, and the testimonies did not agree" (Mark 14:56). The Greek translated "did not agree" was used of two things that were not equal in number.<sup>8</sup> The language depicted the testimony of Jesus' accusers as not corresponding on essential points.<sup>9</sup> Mark used imperfect tense verbs to describe the disagreement amongst the Sanhedrin, conveying a sense of repeated action.<sup>10</sup> The idea was that over and over again numerous false witnesses brought unsubstantiated charges against our Lord.

It is evident the Sanhedrin had no real charges to levy against Jesus. They succumbed to deceit and lying in their attempts to ensnare our Lord. Their actions certainly went against legal precedent. The first-century Sanhedrin had a practice that was similar to that within the modern American legal system. Defendants were normally given the benefit of the doubt. One

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<sup>5</sup> Robertson, 386.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, 242.

<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 100.

<sup>9</sup> Robertson, 387.

<sup>10</sup> (Robertson, 387.

was assumed innocent until proven guilty.<sup>11</sup> Legal norms were abandoned in the case of Jesus. The seventy elders had a vendetta. They wanted Jesus dead and they were willing to pervert justice to ensure a guilty verdict.

Mark's scene was one of gross injustice. Under Mosaic Law, at least two or three witnesses had to agree on a matter for a guilty sentence to be upheld (Deuteronomy 19:15). Jesus Himself referenced the practice in Matthew 18:16. No one was to be put to death on account of the testimony of only one witness (Numbers 35:30). Josephus speaks of the way in which Jews held to these prescriptions from the Mosaic Law in Jesus' day.<sup>12</sup>

Because of their desire to protect their power, the Sanhedrin abandoned legal norms. They turned their backs on God's Word. They perverted justice and gave themselves over to deceit. Jesus' death was their goal and they were willing to forsake God's Law to accomplish their aim. They were completely given over to sin.

### **Verse 57**

Verse 57 says, "Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, stating..." The reference to standing indicated that the testimonies against Jesus came from the Sanhedrin. The picture was of individual members of the council rising from their official seats of power to bring accusations.<sup>13</sup> Mark meant to show that no outside witnesses were brought forth. Those who were not a part of the power structure in Jerusalem may have spoken favorably of Jesus (Mark 11:7-10), so they were not invited to the trial.

The elders were not concerned with justice. They positioned themselves as jury, judge, and executioner. They wanted Jesus dead, so they set up a kangaroo court. Since they were unable to generate corroborating evidence against Him, the Sanhedrin created more lies about Jesus, bringing "false testimony against him." In doing so, they violated the ninth commandment (Exodus 20:16). Though they accused Jesus of sin, they were the ones guilty of breaking God's Law. The council of elders displayed the depravity of man in their dealings with Jesus.

### **Verse 58**

Attempting to find some way of incriminating Jesus, the Sanhedrin focused on the temple. They said, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands, and in three days I will build another not made by hands'" (Mark 14:58). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint), and in rabbinical tradition, the wording "human hands" was used as technical language to refer to that which was idolatrous.<sup>14</sup> In ascribing the words to Jesus, the Sanhedrin accused our Lord of idolatry. They portrayed Him as being pagan, as usurping the holy things of God.

It isn't entirely clear where the Sanhedrin got their information. The New Testament never mentions Jesus making a specific claim in regard to destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days. In John 2:19 He spoke of His resurrection with similar language, and in Mark 13:2 He predicted the destruction of the temple in AD 70. However, He never claimed He would destroy the temple, nor did He make any promises about rebuilding it. The charges against Him were completely unfounded. Perhaps Judas used Jesus' words from John 2:19 and Mark 13:2 to create a false charge the Sanhedrin could use against Jesus.

The accusation in verse 58 was actually one of treason. According to first-century Jewish expectations, the Messiah would construct a new temple after chasing out Roman rule. By accusing Jesus of planning such an insurrection, the Sanhedrin knew they had charges

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<sup>11</sup> Ferguson, 246.

<sup>12</sup> Brooks, 242.

<sup>13</sup> Schnabel, 379.

<sup>14</sup> Schnabel, 380.

Rome would have to take seriously. Treason was a crime the empire did not take lightly. Crucifixion had actually been invented for the primary purpose of deterring insurrectionists. The Sanhedrin knew a charge of treason would illicit a death sentence. John's Gospel reveals that the scheme was effective. Jesus would eventually be killed for conspiracy against the state (John 19:12-16).

### **Verse 59**

Though they seemed to find a way to accuse Jesus, "their testimony did not agree even on this" (Mark 14:59). According to the Mishnah, proceedings within the Sanhedrin typically involved an interrogation that covered seven different questions. The seventy were required to establish a date, time, and place that a crime occurred.<sup>15</sup> Apparently, they were unable to corroborate on such details in the case of Jesus. Their charges were unsubstantiated.

### **Verse 60**

Verse 60 continued the narrative, saying, "Then the high priest stood up before them all and questioned Jesus, 'Don't you have an answer to what these men are testifying against you?'" (Mark 14:60). The fact that the high priest stood up indicated that the trial was drawing to a close. The high priest was ready for a final decision. However, he knew he had no real incriminating evidence, so he resorted to cross examining Jesus. Maybe if Jesus talked He would say something that would implicate Himself in a crime.<sup>16</sup>

### **Verse 61**

Mark described Jesus' response to High Priest, saying, "But he kept silent and did not answer" (Mark 16:41). Our Lord's refusal to answer was a fulfillment of both Psalm 38:13-14 and Isaiah 53:7. It also served as a rebuttal to the Sanhedrin's falsehood. In remaining silent, Jesus maintained His innocence. Since the charges were false, there was no need for Him to respond. Doing so would have required Him to stoop to His accusers' level. By keeping quiet, He provided a just witness in the midst of a den of liars.<sup>17</sup>

From His actions, we are reminded that we have a Lord who is of impeccable character, absolute righteousness, and total truth. In the book of Revelation, John called Him the faithful and true witness (Revelation 1:5).<sup>18</sup> He also depicted Jesus has returning to earth as the One who is "Faithful and True" (Revelation 19:11). Peter encouraged first-century readers by reminding them of the Lord's character in this regard. He wrote to believers who, like Mark's readership, were being persecuted for their faith. He told them, "...when he was insulted, he did not insult in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). Mark likely had a similar application in mind for his audience.

There is great meaning for us in our Lord's response. Attempting to get retribution for ourselves is never the proper Christian response. Lashing out doesn't accomplish anything. It tarnishes our witness and it doesn't represent the character of our Lord. The world may swap insults and banter back and forth with cruel condemnations, but we are called to live differently. May we learn to be silent when people criticize us unjustly. Jesus' actions in the courtroom, and on the cross, teach us that a non-response is often better than a response.

Annoyed by Jesus' silence, the High Priest pressed further, asking, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" (Mark 14:61). The titles "Messiah" and "Son of the Blessed One" were of high regard in first-century Jerusalem. They were often applied to Israel's anticipated deliverer. Perhaps the council heard that Jesus sometimes referred to

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<sup>15</sup> Schnabel, 378.

<sup>16</sup> Schnabel, 381.

<sup>17</sup> Ferguson, 247.

<sup>18</sup> Ferguson, 247.

Himself as the Son of God. Mark had recorded instances in which our Lord made such pronouncements about Himself (Mark 1:11 and 9:7).<sup>19</sup> Aware of Jesus' professions, the High Priest seized an opportunity. If Jesus affirmed He was the Messianic Son of God, the Sanhedrin would have warrant for a guilty verdict. The end goal was to get Jesus to say something incriminating, something blasphemous or treasonous, so that they might have cause to put Him to death.

### **Verse 62**

Though He previously remained silent, Jesus chose to respond to the High Priest's latest question. He 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" (Mark 14:62). Our Lord's pronouncement was an unmistakable claim of divinity. His words likely evoked thoughts of Exodus 3:14. They seem to have included an allusion to the divine name — "I am."<sup>20</sup>

Considering the way in which Jesus was secretive about His identity earlier in Mark's gospel, it may seem strange that He made an outright claim in our current verse. While on Earth, Jesus often concealed His true identity to keep his death on the Heavenly Father's sovereign schedule. Scholars often refer to His practice as "the Messianic mystery." In Mark, our Lord's secrecy was first exhibited in Mark 1:44. He knew a claim of messiahship would lead folks to either make Him an earthly king or put Him to death. Wanting to keep things in alignment with the Father's plans, He often masked His true identity.

In our current text, Jesus changed His approach. He chose to speak openly, because He knew His time had come. It was the Lord's plan for Him to now give Himself as a sacrifice for sin, so He boldly proclaimed who He was — "The Son of Man!" One has commented, "Since Jesus' fate was sealed, secrecy was no longer necessary."<sup>21</sup>

The title Jesus used of Himself was a clear claim at divinity. It was drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures. Both the Psalmist and Daniel used it to speak of the Divine Messiah who would rule on Earth at the end of time (Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus used the title of Himself on numerous occasions in Mark's gospel (Mark 2:10, 2:28, 8:38, 9:12, 9:31, 10:33, 10:45, 13:26, 14:21).

It is interesting to note that Jesus, the one who was "The Son of Man," stood to be judged by the Sanhedrin. According to Daniel's prophecy, the title used by our Lord was one that had connotations of judgment (Daniel 7:13-14).<sup>22</sup> It appears the irony in our text was intentional. Though the Sanhedrin sinfully passed judgment on our Lord, He would one day return to judge them in righteousness. Jesus emphasized the reality of coming judgment in His response by speaking of Himself "coming with the clouds of heaven." His proclamation to the Sanhedrin was in alignment with what He told His disciples earlier in Mark 13:26. For us, Jesus' words bring to mind the truth of Revelation 1:7. Mark most likely meant to encourage his readers with Jesus' example. Many were being unjustly judged by godless people. They needed to commit themselves to the One who would one day judge justly (1 Peter 2:23).

There is meaning for modern believers in Jesus' response as well. We are called to respond righteously when we are harshly criticized by others (1 Peter 3:9). We are also instructed to avoid sinfully and self-righteously judging others (Matthew 7:1-6). It should be our aim to commit ourselves to the One who will ultimately render righteous judgment (Romans 12:17-20). An expectation concerning Christ's return will help us have the right attitude in the face of those who persecute us. May we cultivate the frame of mind that John possessed in Revelation 22:20, always praying, "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" May we be people who put our

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<sup>19</sup> Schnabel, 384.

<sup>20</sup> Brooks, 243.

<sup>21</sup> Brooks, 243.

<sup>22</sup> Brooks, 243.

ultimate confidence in the judgment of the Lord, not the judgment of others. May our trust be in Him and the day He returns to right all wrongs.

### **Verse 63**

Hearing the words of our Lord, "...the high priest tore his robes" (Mark 14:63). The response was in accordance with requirements of the Mishnah. In the first-century world, tearing one's clothes was a symbol of grief. However, the High Priest had more in mind when he ripped his. According to rabbinical tradition, charges of blasphemy required him to tear his robes as a sign of holy indignation against a defendant guilty of blasphemy.<sup>23</sup> In effect, the act was a "formal judicial act indicating a guilty verdict."<sup>24</sup>

After visibly demonstrating his belief that Jesus was guilty, the High Priest asked his colleagues, "Why do we still need witnesses?" (Mark 14:63). The Sanhedrin had previously been unable to find witnesses who could agree on an incriminating story (Mark 14:55-59), so they had been unable to secure a guilty verdict. Jesus, however, had just given them the ammunition they needed. Based on His profession, they had cause for a death sentence. Since He had made Himself out to be a messianic figure, they had reason to present Him to Rome on charges of treason.

### **Verse 64**

The High Priest pressed the proceedings to a close, asking his counterparts, "You have heard the blasphemy. What is your decision?" (Mark 14:64). Based on the teaching of the elders, the ruling elite had a rather stringent view regarding blasphemy. In times prior to the Mishnah, misuse of the holy name of God was the primary, if not the only, grounds for a blasphemy charge. By the time the of the first century, Mishnaic tradition introduced a smorgasbord of reasons for accusing a person of the crime. Any act or deed regarded as disrespectful to the holy things of God could solicit a guilty verdict.<sup>25</sup> Having heard Jesus' remarks concerning His identity, the High Priest felt the Sanhedrin had just cause for a death sentence.

The council followed the High Priest's lead. Mark said, "They all condemned him as deserving death" (Mark 14:64). The original language of the text used technical jargon that depicted a formal vote of condemnation.<sup>26</sup> Most likely, neither Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43) nor Nicodemus (John 7:50-52) were present for the vote. The gospels elsewhere presented the men as having been loyal to our Lord.<sup>27</sup>

Though the death sentence seemed to have been handed down by men, it was actually of the Lord. The stage was set for God's eternal plan of salvation to be fulfilled. Our narrative seems to contain a clear reference to Jesus' substitutionary work on behalf of humanity. Mark's readers would have seen the presence of the cross in the courtroom proceedings. Peter, who was a source for Mark's gospel, spoke eloquently of Christ's work for sin, saying, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24).

It is interesting to note that Peter's words about the atonement appeared in the same passage in which he encouraged readers to follow Jesus' example in suffering, a passage we have previously quoted. Mark's account in Mark 14:53-65 has numerous parallels with Peter's teaching in 1 Peter 2:1:18-25. The continuity between the two passages reveals that the scorned have an example to follow in Christ, but it also reveals that they have a source of

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<sup>23</sup> Brooks, 244.

<sup>24</sup> Schnabel, 385.

<sup>25</sup> Schnabel, 386.

<sup>26</sup> Brooks, 244.

<sup>27</sup> Robertson, 388.

spiritual strength too. When facing persecution and mockery, the abused only need to look to the cross for help. The power of sin and death have been broken by Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. The gospel gives security and strength. Those who feel wrecked by the words and accusations of fallen society can find courage by trusting in Jesus' work on their behalf. All should make Paul's pronouncement in Galatians 2:20 their own — "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

### **Verse 65**

With the guilty verdict having been handed down, "some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to beat him, saying, 'Prophecy!' The temple servants also took him and slapped him" (Mark 14:65). The actions of the Sanhedrin may seem like mere uncontrolled outbursts of enraged men. Indeed, the displays were sinful and unjust, but they were all a part of first-century Sanhedrin court. Spitting was an official display of legal guilt. It was intended to invoke shame upon a guilty criminal. The practice was grounded in precedent from the Law of Moses (Numbers 12:14 and Deuteronomy 25:9).

Although they felt they had gained the upper hand over Jesus, providence was accomplishing redemptive purposes. Their actions were ultimately a fulfillment of Scripture. The "blindfold" over Jesus' eyes was foretold in prophecy. Jewish tradition maintained, based on a popular understanding of Isaiah 11:2-4, that the Messiah would be able to judge without seeing.<sup>28</sup> In covering Jesus' eyes, the Sanhedrin helped portray Him as the fulfillment of Scripture. In addition, the fact that they "beat him" fulfilled Jesus' own prophecies from Mark 8:31, 9:31, and 10:34.

The Sanhedrin's cruel treatment was a fulfillment of prophecy. It paved the way for the work of the cross. However, it also displayed the depravity of the human heart. Though the embodiment of righteousness stood before them, the court was unable to appreciate Him. They responded to the righteous one with a display of cruel unrighteousness, proving, "The heart is more deceitful than anything else, and incurable—who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). The Sanhedrin demonstrated why Jesus had to die — "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). Though our text is a difficult one to read, it ultimately points us to gospel glory. The courtroom led to the cross.

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<sup>28</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 101.