



I AM on Trial

Mark 14:53 – 15:15

David Sunday March 29, 2020

How ironic that the same God Who could bring Egypt’s Pharaoh to his knees with just a swarm of tiny gnats is now bringing our nation to a screeching halt with an invisible virus. There’s been a post going around on social media about all the things we tend to worship in our culture: sports, musicians, celebrities, actors and actresses, money and industry. It’s all be shut down. The post suggests there’s a deeper meaning under the surface of this worldwide pandemic—how little control we have, how finite and frail we really are, how completely powerless we are to subdue and defeat death, how entirely dependent we are on the One Who created and sustains us and Who will judge us.

Irony is when there’s a deeper meaning under the surface. Irony is when a reader can see a truth to which the characters in the story are all blind. And irony tends to create a division between those who get it—those who see what’s really going on—and those who only have a superficial understanding of the situation.

The passage before us in Mark 14 and 15 is about the trial of Jesus. Last week, we saw irony in this passage when Judas, one of Jesus’ closest friends, hands Jesus over to those who will demand His crucifixion with a kiss. This is where we get the phrase, “the kiss of death,” referring to an act of love that is actually an act of treachery.

We also saw them trying to capture the Son of God with clubs and swords and sticks, as if Jesus was some kind of terrorist or revolutionary. but this week we’re going to see them demanding that an actual terrorist be set free so that Jesus can die instead. That’s irony. Last week we saw all the disciples saying they would never leave or deny Jesus, but in a matter of just a few hours, they all desert and run away

That brings us to the passage before us today. Let’s start reading at Mark 14:53. Hear God’s Word:

⁵³ They led Jesus away to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes assembled. ⁵⁴ Peter followed him at a distance, right into the high priest’s courtyard. He was sitting with the servants, warming himself by the fire.

Something Mark loves to do is create what scholar's call a "Markan Sandwich" —a narrative where there are three episodes, with the real meaning of the passage in the middle. What we have in verses 53 and 54 in this first "piece of sandwich bread" is that Jesus is being roughly dragged away by those who arrested Him so they could bear witness before the Jewish religious authorities. The high priest is hastily assembling all the chief priests, elders and scribes.

I've never had to call an elder meeting in the middle of the night and I'm sure our elders hope I'll never have to do that. I would imagine it would be pretty difficult, even with texts and phone calls, or maybe even having to knock on the door of a few sound sleepers. That's what's going on here. It's not the way trials were supposed to be held, but this is no ordinary trial. This is a kangaroo court that's being cobbled together in the middle of the night. They already know their verdict.

In verse 54, we see Peter—and what is he doing? He's following at a distance. That phrase is significant, alerting us to the fact that Peter has already begun drifting away from the Jesus he professed he would never leave or forsake. Now he's awkwardly mingling in the courtyard of the high priests. He's trying to disguise himself out there, warming himself by the fire. He doesn't want to be seen, but he does want to see what's going on.

One commentator describes it like this: "Peter has forsaken a discipleship of costly following for one of safe observation." We shouldn't think ourselves one bit superior to Peter. We should see ourselves just like him. Sometimes we're costly followers; other times we're safe observers. A disciple is someone who follows Jesus all the way, who counts the cost, denies himself and follows Him. Jesus said that would be the cost of discipleship. A disciple is someone who not only commits personally to follow Jesus, but also to make disciples of others. How do we do that? We proclaim His Word in prayerful dependence on His Spirit to real people who need Jesus, and we persevere in it. Those are the four P's: Prayerful dependence upon the Spirit, as we Proclaim the Word to real People with Perseverance. That's what a disciple does.

A disciple is someone who dies to his own comfort in order to engage, evangelize, equip and establish believers in Jesus, who will then multiply and do the same for others. That's what discipleship is. It's not a spectator sport. It's costly. It invites scorn. It invites rejection. It demands total commitment. Friends, this is a cost none of us has the ability to handle if we're left to our own resources. We will all do the same thing Peter did. We all have done the same thing Peter did. Instead of truly following Jesus, there have been times when each one of us has just been trailing along. That's why we should be astonished and amazed at the price Jesus is about to pay for Peter, as well as for you and me.

The hour has come in which no man can stand, not even Jesus' closest followers. Jesus alone can do what Jesus is about to do. Only Jesus can do helpless sinners any good. It's not until Jesus bears His cross that we will be enabled by His Spirit to share in the fellowship of His sufferings and follow Him with more faithfulness. So verses 53 and 54 are the first "piece of bread."

Let's move to the meat of the sandwich, which is in verses 55-59:

⁵⁵ The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they could not find any. ⁵⁶ For many were giving false testimony against him, and the testimonies did not agree. ⁵⁷ Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, stating, ⁵⁸ "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.'" ⁵⁹ Yet their testimony did not agree even on this.

Clearly they're not going after the truth. They have already decided this trial absolutely must end with only one conclusion: a guilty sentence. They're just looking for a way to sanction it. But they can't even get two liars to agree with one another. So this is not a case of the person being innocent until proven guilty. This is instead a case of One Who is clearly innocent being condemned as guilty. In Jesus' humiliation, justice is being denied Him. This is a gross miscarriage of justice. This is a farce of a trial.

But ironically, in their lies, the false witnesses are saying more than a grain of truth. Back in Mark 13:2, Jesus actually did say the temple would be destroyed. And back in the parable of the vineyard (Mark 12:1-12), Jesus did imply that God would take the stone the builders rejected and make it the cornerstone of a glorious new temple. But never did Jesus claim He Himself was going to destroy the temple or raise up a new one. Jesus never said He would do this; He claimed this would be God's doing and it would be wonderful in our eyes.

But here's the heart of the irony. In their rejection, in their destruction of Jesus, they're actually bringing about God's great plan. God is going to destroy the temple in Jerusalem and raise up Jesus and His people to be a new temple made of living stones, indwelt by His Spirit—and He's going to do this in very short time. But there's more. Let's read verses 60-62:

⁶⁰ 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?" ⁶¹ But he kept silent and did not answer.

To the question of the temple, Jesus—the Suffering Servant—is like a lamb that before its shearers is silent (Isaiah 53:7). He did not open His mouth. But now, in his exasperation, the high priest goes for the jugular vein in verse 61:

Again the high priest questioned him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

In the original language, it’s more like a statement with a question implied: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One!” Now, we know the answer to this question, because we’ve read the beginning of Mark’s Gospel. We know in the very first verse, Mark opens his Gospel with these words: *“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”*

Here’s the Jewish high priest, the one who more than anyone wants to prosecute Jesus and put Him to death, and he’s got a full confession of Who Jesus is on his lips. It’s another great irony. In the past, Jesus might have answered a question with a question, but not this time. This time Jesus is direct, only answering with, *“I am.”*

Anyone familiar with the Old Testament can’t wonder if they were hearing an echo of God revealing His name to Moses in Exodus 3:14. When Moses asks Him, “What is your name?” God says, *“I AM WHO I AM.”* But if there’s any doubt as to what Jesus means by His words, all doubt is removed with His next words:

⁶² “I am,” said Jesus, “and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.”

What Jesus is doing here is filling out the definition of what it means to be the Messiah by quoting from two vital arteries that carry the bloodstream of the Old Testament. First, He goes to Daniel 7:13, calling Himself “the Son of Man.” Then He invokes Psalm 110:1, referring to Himself as the One Who is seated at the right hand of Power. Everyone in this room knows what Jesus means. The Son of Man is the One Who’s going to come from God’s throne above down to earth in the clouds of heaven in order to judge the world.

The “clouds of heaven” aren’t just the clouds we see up in the sky. The clouds of heaven are referring to the shekinah glory of God that filled Solomon’s temple on the day it was dedicated. What Jesus is saying here is, “I am the One Who sits at God’s right hand and I am the One Who is going to come down to earth in the shekinah glory of God to judge the whole world.” By saying that, Jesus is clearly saying, “I am equal with God Himself. I have the authority to be the Judge of all the earth.”

Do you see the irony in all this? Here’s Jesus standing in the dock. He’s the defendant. He’s the One on trial—in a rigged trial that’s a mockery of justice. Of all the biblical images, of all

the metaphors Jesus could use to describe Who He is as the Messiah, He goes straight to Daniel 7:13 to say, “I’m the Son of Man Who is coming to judge the world.” That’s ironic! Tim Keller puts it like this: “He is the Judge over the entire world being judged by the world. He should be in the judgment seat and we should be in the dock in chains.”

Everything is turned upside down. Here’s Jesus, the Judge of all, tried by sinful men—torn, beaten, then nailed to a cross of wood. Think about that. Think about how many times in a week you hear the name of Jesus today being scorned and mocked, used as a curse word or an indignant form of exasperation. Why is it that Jesus is still always on trial? Why is it that we still keep making Jesus answer to us, as if we have the right to judge Him? As if we have the right to judge who God is and should be?

I heard this story about a political leader who became a follower of Jesus. Listen to the turning point here. He used to very often speak in a flippant way about all the questions he would have for God when he got up there. One day his wife turned all that on its head when she said to him, “I would be more concerned with the questions God has for you.”

I’m praying this will be the turning point in someone’s life today as you listen to this message. I pray you’ll realize, “I’ve been living all my life as if I have the right to judge Who God is, Who God should be, how God should act and how God should treat me. I’m just now realizing that God is the One Who is going to judge me. I should be more concerned with the questions God has to ask me than with the questions I want to ask Him.” I’m praying that will be the turning point for someone who is hearing this today.

So who’s on trial here? Jesus, the great I AM. But the bracing irony of it all is that in the end, Jesus is not the one Who will be on trial. I am. I am on trial. You are on trial. Everyone in this narrative is on trial, even as they are judging the Judge of all the earth.

The guy who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace,” John Newton, once put it like this. It sounds quaint, but I’ve not forgotten it. “What think you of Christ? That is the test that tries both your state and your scheme, You cannot be right in the rest unless you think rightly of Him.”

One day we’re going to stand before the Judge of all the earth and He’s going to hold the verdict in His hands. All that will matter on that day is: “What think you of Christ?” That is the test that tries both your state and your scheme (your way of living). “You cannot be right in the rest, unless you think rightly of Him.”

Look back at Mark 14:63. There’s no lack of clarity concerning Who Jesus was claiming to be and it ignites an explosive response.

⁶³ Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? ⁶⁴ You have heard the blasphemy. What is your decision?" They all condemned him as deserving death.

You see, it's not Jesus Who is committing blasphemy here; it's the high priest. It's the religious leaders. Jesus really is Who He says He is. He really is the Son of God. He really is the Son of Man. They are plotting and conspiring right now to murder the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One. When we ponder what comes next in verse 65, we should all gasp in horror:

⁶⁵ Then some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to beat him, saying, "Prophecy!" The temple servants also took him and slapped him.

Our lovely Savior, our dear Christ, was being spat upon, slapped, blindfolded, mocked.

Ah, Holy Jesus, how hast Thou offended
That we, to judge Thee, have in hate pretended
By foes derided, by Thine own rejected
O most afflicted

[From "Ah, Holy Jesus" by Johann Heermann]

As the mob assaults Him, they're now trying to lynch Him as a false prophet. Yet ironically they themselves are in the act of fulfilling a prophecy Jesus Himself made more than once. Back in Mark 10:33-34, listen to what Jesus said:

See, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death. Then they will hand him over to the Gentiles, and they will mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him, and he will rise after three days.

We know Jesus said those words, because we've read Mark's Gospel. But they don't. These false witnesses are condemning Jesus as a false prophet, but in the very act of condemning Him, Jesus' prophecy is being fulfilled. And there's more.

This brings us to the top layer of the sandwich, the second piece of bread. While Jesus is facing His trial in the temple above, there's another trial going on in the courtyard below. Let's read about it in Mark 14:66-68:

⁶⁶ While Peter was in the courtyard below, one of the high priest's maidservants came. ⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth."

⁶⁸ But he denied it: “I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about.” Then he went out to the entryway, and a rooster crowed.

What’s Peter doing? He’s trying to save his life. He’s following from a distance and every second he’s getting farther and farther away from Jesus. A servant girl claims, “He’s one of them. He’s one of those followers.” But he brushes it off, “I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.” He turns to leave and the rooster crows. Then look at verse 69:

⁶⁹ When the maidservant saw him again, she began to tell those standing nearby, “This man is one of them.” ⁷⁰ But again he denied it.

The word here implies that Peter flips his lid. He keeps on denying it and people are starting to overhear what he’s saying. Now he’s out in the entryway of the temple and they’re picking up on his accent. Look at verse 70:

*⁷⁰ After a little while those standing there said to Peter again, “You certainly are one of them, since you’re also a Galilean.”
⁷¹ Then he started to curse and swear, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about!”*

Here’s the apostle who said to Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” But now he cannot even bring himself to pronounce Jesus’ name. “*I don’t know this man you’re talking about!*” As Jesus is upstairs testifying to Who He really is—the Son of God and the Son of Man—Peter is outside swearing against Jesus. And that’s when he hears the ominous sound in verse 72:

⁷² Immediately a rooster crowed a second time, and Peter remembered when Jesus had spoken the word to him, “Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

We should weep with Peter, because we know exactly how he feels. We know what it’s like to try to save our lives, trying to fend for ourselves. In the process of losing it—denying the One Who is dearest to us, letting go of everything that matters the most—we know what it’s like.

So praise the name of the Lord our God Who came not to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Praise the One Who did not try to save His life, but Who willingly lost it so that we could be raised to newness of life as He is raised, bringing everlasting life to people like Peter and like us who have forfeited our souls through sin.

I really would like to have more than just a sandwich, so let's look a little bit at Mark 15 which brings us to that last irony of Jesus' trial. I'm sure you're going to agree with me that this is the most exquisite and sublime irony of them all. Here the religious leaders know they can't just execute Jesus on their own. That's not their jurisdiction. So they have to get a decree from the Roman governor Pilate. They know that Pilate, like all the Roman leaders, usually worked at daybreak so they could be done at 11:00 a.m. and spend the rest of the day on their own pleasures.

So they get there at daybreak and have to concoct a political charge. Pilate's not going to care about the temple or prophecy or these religious charges. So they say Jesus is a revolutionary. He claims to be King of the Jews. He wants to overthrow the government. When Pilate asks Him about this, Jesus does not answer a word. Pilate is amazed at Jesus. He doesn't want to put Jesus to death, but he needs a politically expedient solution, which brings us to what I think is the most exquisite irony of all.

Let's read more of the story, beginning at Mark 15:6:

⁶ At the festival Pilate used to release for the people a prisoner whom they requested. ⁷ There was one named Barabbas, who was in prison with rebels who had committed murder during the rebellion.

⁸ The crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do for them as was his custom. ⁹ Pilate answered them, "Do you want me to release the King of the Jews for you?" ¹⁰ For he knew it was because of envy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd so that he would release Barabbas to them instead.

¹² Pilate asked them again, "Then what do you want me to do with the one you call the King of the Jews?"

¹³ Again they shouted, "Crucify him!"

¹⁴ Pilate said to them, "Why? What has he done wrong?"

But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!"

¹⁵ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them; and after having Jesus flogged, he handed him over to be crucified.

Friends, we see Psalm 2 being played out here in real time:

*¹ Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?*

*² The kings of the earth take their stand,
and the rulers conspire together
against the LORD and his Anointed One:*

*³ "Let's tear off their chains
and throw their ropes off of us."*

This is exactly what's happening here, as the Jewish leaders conspire with the Gentiles to rebel against the King and Judge of the universe. But through their murderous rage they will succeed only in enthroning the King of Glory on His cross. When He is lifted up on to that cross, God the Father will gather all people to Himself. His Father will make the nations His inheritance; the ends of the earth will be His possession. All who refuse to bow to King Jesus will perish in their rebellion, but those who take refuge in Him will be blessed (happy) forevermore.

That's what's happening here. That's the exquisite, sublime irony of the trial of Jesus. The One Who is the Judge of all takes the place of the guilty criminal. The Prince of Peace is crucified while a terrorist walks free. The One in Whom is life loses His life so that He might gain life and immortality for everyone who takes refuge in Him. The One Who is our Judge takes the death penalty we deserve to ransom us. The One Who has every right to condemn the world instead lets the world condemn Him—and in so doing, He passes judgment on the failure of the kings of this world and becomes the King of a new creation and the Savior of the world.

The good news is you can get in on this. How? Imagine that you are Barabbas. You're sitting inside your dank and dirty cell. You've spent your last several weeks thinking about your impending doom, about the nails going through your wrists and ankles, about being lifted up on that cross and the prolonged asphyxiation of crucifixion, with the vulture gathering above and the deriding mob below. You're terrified.

One day you wake up and hear that the crowds are gathering outside. They're making more noise than usual. You're wondering: might this be the moment? Soon you hear the guards outside your prison cell, while the crowds are shouting all the more. You cannot make out exactly what the crowds are saying, but two things are very clear. You keep hearing your name. "Barabbas! Barabbas!" Then you hear these words: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

As the crowd shouts all the more, the footsteps of the guards are coming near your cell. The lead guard takes out his key, he puts it in your lock and opens your cell. He stares right into your eyes and you'll never forget the words he says next. "Barabbas, you can go home now. You're a free man. They're crucifying Jesus of Nazareth instead of you." Barabbas walks outside that prison cell and there is Jesus, experiencing the horror of the scourge, as His flesh is being lacerated. Jesus will carry His cross on His back that's been beaten to a pulp. And you realize, "He's being lifted up on the cross I deserve to die on."

Friends, what happened to Barabbas that day in Jerusalem can be the story of your life and my life for all eternity through faith, because each of us is Barabbas. We are the guilty. We are the condemned. We are the sinners, deserving the wages of sin which are death (Romans 6:23). But

there is an innocent One, the holy Son of God, Who is also the Son of Man. He is going to come again to judge the earth, judging you and me.

But before He came to judge, He came into the world, not to condemn the world, but so that the world through Him might be saved (John 3:17). He was enthroned upon a cross so that he could open up His Kingdom of grace and truth to everyone who will repent and believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in Jesus the Kingdom of God has drawn near. God is offering amnesty to repenting, returning sinners.

How do you repent? Turn from thinking, "I'm my own judge. I'm the one who gets to define Who God is, how God should act and what God should do. I realize I will stand before Him one day and He will judge me." Turn from thinking you can live for yourself and realize, "I need to live for the One Who created me and sustains me." Trust in Him, saying, "God, I'm sorry for my rebellion against You, but I thank You that You have given Your Son to die in my place, so that I, the guilty one, might go free."

That's what it means to repent and believe the gospel. When you do that, you enter into this new Kingdom that Jesus has inaugurated on His cross. He will come again in glory to bring the whole earth under submission to Him. The heavens and the earth will be made new, everything wrong will be set right and everything sad will become untrue" Come, Lord Jesus. Ask Him to come into your life and reign over you today. Then live the rest of your life in joyful astonishment and amazement that the Man of Sorrows would come and die for you, then rise again to give you everlasting life.

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