

## True or False?

*Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom*

Mark 14:51-72

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Please turn with me to Mark Chapter 14. This morning we're going to be looking at verses 51-72. As you're turning there, just a brief word on the context as we are moving toward the end of our sermon series. We will be finishing up in the next few weeks. Pastor John will actually be continuing with the next set of verses in Chapter 16 at tonight's Lord's Supper service. So I invite you to that. We are moving toward the culmination of Mark's Gospel. And in his Gospel he gives an account of what happens to Jesus after he was betrayed by Judas and after he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In these events that follow—for the rest of Jesus's life—we see these contrasting pictures of kind of all the different people that are orbiting around Jesus for his whole life, but certainly very focused here at the end of his life. And we see both courage and cowardice. And these events demonstrate—what we also know by experience—that truth is uncomfortable, but it is also free. So let's read together. Well, that's so confusing... Follow along as I read Mark 14:51-72.

<sup>51</sup> And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, <sup>52</sup> but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.

<sup>53</sup> And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. <sup>54</sup> 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. <sup>55</sup> Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. <sup>56</sup> For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. <sup>57</sup> And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, <sup>58</sup> “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.’” <sup>59</sup> Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. <sup>60</sup> 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?” <sup>61</sup> But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” <sup>62</sup> 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.” <sup>63</sup> And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? <sup>64</sup> You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death. <sup>65</sup> And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophesy!” And the guards received him with blows.

<sup>66</sup> And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, <sup>67</sup> and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." <sup>68</sup> But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. <sup>69</sup> And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." <sup>70</sup> 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." <sup>71</sup> But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this man of whom you speak." <sup>72</sup> 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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

True or False? I'm going to begin with prayer. (For a second there I didn't know what I was doing.) Let us pray. Lord, we do ask that you would bless us. And it is good to laugh even with such a weighty moment in the life of our Savior, even in a weighty moment of the Gospel of Mark. Give us ears to hear and a heart to understand, and help me to teach clearly. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

True or false? Today is November 5. True or false? You are currently sitting in a gym at Columbia Presbyterian Church. True or false? The Houston Astros won the World Series. True or false? The Houston Astros are a better team than the Dodgers. True or false? Baseball is a better sport than football.

True/false questions are better represented by objective, fact-based truth, is it not? Once we get into more subjective or nuanced questions, then true and false questions are easily debatable. But you and I both know that subjective questions like 'baseball vs football' are fun to argue about, but are of little consequence—for most of us, at least. But discerning the truth of more weighty matters is of utmost significance, is it not? We expect our nation's free press to present the truth, and we rightfully get upset when we suspect biased journalism. We expect our courts to seek truth in order to declare right verdicts, and we are rightfully disturbed when justice has been undermined. Most of life is 'football vs baseball' type of reality.

But there are moments, however, where life depends on what is true and false. Today's passage present such a moment when one man stands and one man falls on truth or falsehood. But for everyone involved in the passage, for everyone involved—even for us today in this room—we see that truth is uncomfortable.

So as we look at this passage this morning we're going to divide it up into two sections, first looking at verses 51-65, looking at Jesus before his accusers; and then 66-72, Peter before his. Now I will do what Randy did the other week and admit up front that in my own preparation this is much, much heavier on the first point, and we will see how far we get. But as we look at Jesus before his accusers we see that every event and every interaction in the Gospel of Mark has been moving toward these moments. The crowds have heard and seen amazing things, and they have been hopeful. The religious leaders have heard and seen things they cannot explain and are doubtful, and often they are disdainful toward Jesus. The disciples, on the other hand,

have heard and seen things, and though they begin to believe, they often still misunderstand.

And so we come to the moment—like any good movie or any good book—when all of the build-up starts to come together, all of the threads begin coming together in a very rich tapestry and the picture starts coming out. In these moments—you are familiar with both movies and books, but your own life—where the action actually speeds up, but time slows down. That's what's happening in these last sections of the Gospel of Mark. We are seeing the plot thicken; we're seeing the plot turn. And it's moving very rapidly to a climax and resolution. And as we've gone through the Gospel of Mark we've seen characters develop, and we've seen foreshadowing of events to come. But now as the readers of this today, we're actually now in the same position as the people being presented in the text. We are hanging on the edge of our seat of what's going to be happening next. So when the high priest asked his question in verse 61, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" we're like the crowd that just wants to lean in and make sure we hear what is about to be said.

Before we get there, though, let's get some context. We're at the high priest's home. And right before being taken there, Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples. We saw how Judas returned and betrayed Jesus, and he was arrested. And when they had seized him, everybody fled. All the disciples who had pledged loyalty fled. Peter, who had pledged that he would go unto his death, ran away. And we even see this obscure comment in verse 51 about a young man who avoided capture by jumping out of his clothing. Now, there's been some debate of who this man is. Some have thought it's actually Mark himself, putting himself in the text. He lived in Jerusalem at this time. He would have been a young man. Other people have made other conjectures. Some have even made the suggestion that this is Bartimaeus. Upon receiving his sight, after calling out to the Son of David to have mercy on him—remember he took off his cloak and followed Jesus to Jerusalem. The cloth that is right above the skin would be under the outer cloak and you have this kind of an undergarment. And that's now this naked man running away. But any guess is actually speculation, and to be honest, it's unimportant. What is important is that everyone scattered, just like Jesus said they would all the way back in verse 27. And Jesus remains alone, and he remains abandoned to drink the cup given him.

Verse 53 tells us where they went next and who was present. The chief priests were those high ranking priestly families. The elders were probably officials from the ruling families of the city. And the scribes were experts in the Law of Moses. Both the Sadducees and the Pharisees would have been represented here at the council, and this council is called the Sanhedrin. And although the estimated seventy or so members of the Sanhedrin probably were not all present, a quorum was likely established at some point during the course of their proceedings.

So what was this council doing in the middle of the night? Now you may have read or heard how this was an illegal trial. There were specific rules governing trials conducted by the Sanhedrin, and everything that happened to Jesus here in this text could truly be interpreted as falling short of those rules. However, those rules were written down in the second century, and it really is hard to know for sure if they were actually in effect at the time of Jesus's lifetime. It's not necessary and even perhaps unhelpful to interject them onto the text here. So instead of seeing this as a trial, this is more like a hearing. It is more like the opportunity that they are hearing witnesses, getting evidence. They're forming their case against Jesus to say, to present before Pilate the following morning.

Pilate was serving as the Roman governor at that time over Judea. And he is the one actually... With Roman occupation the Roman governor had the legal authority to try capital crimes and to sentence the guilty party to death, which we see in verse 55 is actually the council's desired outcome. Time is of the essence due to the Passover feast that just happened and the approaching Sabbath day the following evening. They quickly gather to assess and to see if they have a case they can win.

So what evidence do they find. Nothing and everything. Verse 56 says many rose to bear false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. The closest thing we have to an actual charge comes in verse 58, but even this testimony did not agree. Jesus never declared himself that he would destroy the temple. People may have misheard him teaching to his disciples such as in Mark 13:2 where he said, "There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." John's Gospel in Chapter 2 does have a recording where Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." And we see this accusation around the temple showing up again at Jesus's crucifixion in Chapter 15, and you see it again in Acts Chapter 6 and 7 when Stephen, one of the first deacons, preaches and is stoned to death.

The temple, if you remember from other sermons we've done in this series, was the central component to the religious, to the economic, to the cultural life of the people of God. And the temple sanctuary—which is actually the word that's being used here. Other places in Mark it's a different term to refer to the whole, all of the temple complex, all the buildings, as well. But here it's specifically talking about the sanctuary; it was the dwelling place of the Living God. And so we see Jesus wisely and prudently, which is the same thing, remaining silent. You see as we read earlier from Deuteronomy [Chapter] 19, Jesus knew what God's word said: "Only on the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses shall a charge be established (Deuteronomy 19:15b). And therefore Jesus had no interest in incriminating himself to false accusations.

The charges of destroying the temple were very serious to the Jewish people. To speak against the temple was to speak against the law of Moses, and to speak against the law of Moses was to speak against God himself. However, the high priest probably knew that such an offense wouldn't warrant a death sentence under Roman rule. For that he needed something else. And so the High Priest steered the debate to the one question everyone wanted to know. "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" or the Son of the Blessed One. And for the first time in the Gospel of Mark Jesus is no longer cryptic. He responds clearly. He responds confidently by saying in verse [62], "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

What does that do to you when you hear it? We have thousands of years between us, we have cultural barriers, we have language barriers. We get a sense of what it means by seeing what the High Priest does next. But take stock of how you would respond to that comment: "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." So what does the High Priest do next? Upon hearing Jesus, he tears his clothes. That's a common reaction in many places in the world today. In some ways it actually still is even in our context. When people are so angry and so grieved and so offended, they really do lose all sense of propriety, all sense of customs. And in this context it actually is communicating something about rendering your garments. He's responding to what he says is blasphemous. So on the one hand, from his perspective, he is reacting to what he considers blasphemy. But on the other hand, it also adds a dramatic flair to the proceedings that may help persuade the

council members.

So what did Jesus do? Did he commit blasphemy? Is that an accurate charge? Is that what he's guilty of? In the Bible, and then in the oral traditions of the religious leaders of the time, there are very intricate writings on what constitutes blasphemy and what doesn't. In a general sense one could be accused of blasphemy by explicitly saying the Divine Name of God and certainly misusing the Divine Name of God. In ancient Near Eastern cultures to say the name of the deity was to exercise power over it. And so the Jewish people had customs of not saying God's name, even though God himself revealed it to Moses in Exodus Chapter 3: "I am who I am." When you see in your English Bible the word 'LORD' in all caps, that is actually God's name being written, although people would not speak it, they would say a different word.

In some Jewish circles blasphemy could be broader, as well. For example, a person could speak arrogantly against God himself or even act against God, his people, or even the temple. Those things could be considered blasphemy. You may have noticed me saying how people didn't even say the name of God. You may have noticed that the high priest avoids saying 'God' by asking Jesus, Are you the Son of the Blessed One? Are you the Son of the Blessed? He is himself trying to avoid blasphemy. And again, Jesus confidently and wisely also avoids saying the word of God, the name. He uses his favorite title for himself, the Son of Man, but he says where he will be seated at the right hand of Power. Both the high priest and Jesus, they're talking about God, but they are referring to him by other names.

So on one hand Jesus is finally accused of blasphemy, because he's presuming something. But on the other hand he's not technically guilty of a specific case of naming or misusing God's name. So how is how accusation still bearing out. He's finally accused of blasphemy because Jesus claims to be equal with God. It's absurd, really. It's scandalous. And on one hand you can empathize with the chief priests, who in their right mind can claim equality with God?

But how do we know that's what Jesus is doing? Well, first off we see that Jesus agrees that he is the Christ. He is the Messiah, which was a technical term for Jewish understanding of the Messiah, the Savior, the one to restore Israel. He responds by just saying 'I am.' Though this is a direct response to a direct question, the answer does draw our attention to that place in history when God reveals himself: "I am who I am." Jesus is intentionally playing with the response. By answering the question he's also declaring who he is.

But claiming to be the Messiah didn't automatically mean that person was claiming equality with God. There were people claiming to be Messiah before Jesus, and there were people claiming to be the Messiah hundreds of years later after Jesus. So they didn't automatically give you the charge of blasphemy. But it's what Jesus adds to this response that is incredibly important. He brings together two Old Testament passages: Psalm 110 and Daniel 7. Jesus has referred to these passages before in the Gospel of Mark, but here we see in this moment he's combining them. By combining them he is declaring both his identity as the Son of Man who sits on the right hand of God, as well as his mission to execute judgment among the nations and among God's people—and for that matter all peoples, all nations, all languages. That the whole world will submit and be under the rule and reign of the Messiah. Jesus is self-identifying with this task, this role, this identity as Messiah.

There were Jewish groups, to be sure, that they would maybe say that Moses or Enoch were

worthy enough of sitting at the right hand of God, kind of in an honorable or prestigious manner. But no person would claim that for himself. And so Jesus in one sentence announces that he is both the Messiah, the Savior, and that he is equal with God, the Lord. In one sentence Jesus claims to be the Messiah and equal with God. Jesus's appeal to these two texts suggests that the crisis moment in Israel's history is now. Jesus is the faithful Israelite who fulfills the law. And more than that, he shares authority with the Most High God.

True or false? This is not a baseball/football question. This is blasphemy in the council's eyes, because this man who is being judged by them—if he is correct in his assumption—he should be the one judging over them. He should be the one reigning over them. He should be the one that is inviting them to follow him. And those who follow him would actually be the authentic, true, genuine people of God who are recognizing his authority as Messiah and his right to redeem and restore as King.

Jesus spoke the truth, and it was uncomfortable to the council. They condemned him as deserving death. All that is left is to present their case to Pilate as soon as dawn breaks. In the meantime they begin mocking him. They are asking him to prophesy. They spit on him. They beat him. And one of the other gospels mentions, "Tell us who struck you." And in doing so they are taunting him. They're playing a cruel kid's game of blind man's bluff, covering his face and hitting him. Saying, 'You're the messiah—tell us who hit you!' Based off a passage in Isaiah the Messiah was able to be a prophet, as well. The irony is Jesus had already prophesied. The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him. He said that in Mark Chapter 10. He said that in Mark Chapter 9. He said that in Mark Chapter 8. Question: Is it true or false?

As we move on to verses 66-72 we see Peter before his accusers. And whereas Jesus stood before his accusers and answered truthfully to their false accusations, we see a completely different account here. We see Peter, correctly identified multiple times of who he is and [what his] association is with Jesus, and we see three times that he responds with falsehoods.

Now in verse 54 we have been introduced to where Peter is. These events are happening simultaneously. Jesus is in some room in the house—we don't know exactly where—and Peter is in the courtyard of the high priest's home where there is a crowd. Most likely servants, maybe the guards that brought in Jesus. Other people are trickling in. And it's a large enough group where Peter can kind of be inskipic...inskipic... I can't say the word...where he can be *incognito*. I'll say it that way. And so we have this disciple of Jesus who is conflicted. He's made vows that I will go to my death with you. And the first moment of conflict, he runs. But we still see him trying. I gotta see. I gotta figure out how to get close. I don't know what I'm gonna do, but I gotta get in there. So we see him coming in and he's in front of the fire and he's identified.

And what's so fascinating about these two passages. . . We see in in Jesus's accusations we have these broad, false accusations that don't agree with one another. And it gets narrower and narrower, to the high priest who gets to the crux of the matter. And with Peter we start with something very specific, with the servant girl identifying who he is, probably from the light of the fire illuminating his face. And it gets broader and broader. He's confronted a second time and she starts talking to other bystanders. And then the third time it's kind of, a rumor is kind of spread a little bit larger and broader, and now the group is now identifying him. And each time

he is denying Jesus.

We see Jesus quietly standing with courage before falsehood, and we see Peter loudly standing in cowardice before truth. Just as truth made the chief priests and the council uncomfortable with what was at stake. If the Messiah is here, then we've got to change. The way we do business, the way we do life has to be redefined. My status teaches the people we are priests. We do the work of the temple. We help people's relationship with God. But if the Messiah is here, my job changes. I'm not out of a job, but my job changes. And now I have to submit to him as Lord. Likewise Peter is uncomfortable with truth.

Now in many ways this is more reflective of our circumstances. Rarely do we have these moments where our life depends on a profession of faith. It does exist. It exists in the world today. But maybe rarely in our context, at least right now. And so we live more like a situation with Peter, which is how do we respond to association with Jesus? How do we respond when we are called out for features of our very personhood that deem us outside the status quo? Remember he's recognized by his accent. Galileans were not thought of highly by people in Jerusalem. They were country bumpkins. They had a different dialect.

So what is your natural response to an accusation? Do you get louder in your boasts? Do you get louder in your defense? Do you outright deny? Do you pretend? Do you hide, hoping that the heat of the spotlight moves on? The truth is uncomfortable. It exposes something in us. It exposes something about us. On one hand it can expose where we are unbelieving of who Jesus is. But on the other hand it exposes where we are still unwilling to follow him. We want to follow him only so far. Everybody has a breaking point. The young man had a breaking point, and that was nakedness. He was 'I gotta go!' Peter, he's maybe a little courageous: I want to get closer. The truth is uncomfortable. Where the Sanhedrin was full of unbelief and contempt, Peter was conflicted and weak and embarrassed, just like the other disciples—being scared.

Where the gospel comes in, even in these moments—as you think about your faith in Christ and you look to the cross, as we've sung about, you have to expand your embrace of the fullness of the gospel. Because you are saved by the work of Christ on the cross, but you are saved by his words spoken to the council. He is standing with full authority of who he is. Because this is the reality of what's happening. Now in history there's been terrible things that have happened. Everybody wants to blame somebody for killing Jesus. Many times it's the Jews. Other times we want to displace that and blame the Romans; it's Pilate's fault.

Here's the thing. The gospel confronts us with an uncomfortable truth: Everybody is guilty. Jesus is the only one that's innocent. And he stands and he willfully lays down his life. He willfully. . . . When he says, 'I am,' he's not caught in the corner. He's not exposed like, ok, you got me, you've pushed me to the limit. He is perfectly in a timely place where he is. He is there because he wants to be there. He is there because he knows what he is going to do. He knows that his understanding of himself as the Messiah is so far different than the people of Israel at the time. That they were expecting the restoration and the glory and the victory, and Jesus was there to say my power is made perfect in weakness, my glory comes through suffering. And I'm going to walk the path of my death, my death for you. For you, chief priest, who tears your garments and accuses me of blasphemy. For you, Peter, who denies me three times, even though you vowed three times that you wouldn't. For you, servant girl in the courtyard. For you, young man who is naked. For you and for me, "I am, and I will."

I have second hand knowledge of a man in Sudan. This story is second hand. Sudan has had long years of protracted conflict, internal displacement of people, civil war. A lot of conflict and strife. And this particular man worked for, I guess, the government. And he would participate in the persecution of the Christians. Really anybody, but Christians were involved. And it was interrogations, it was torture. I won't... I'm not going to go into details of what he endured...or what he was participating in for others. But somewhere along the line he started to believe. He started to believe what these men and women were placing their faith in. These men and women were loving him. The very person who is hurting them, the very person who is having their life in the balance—they're loving him. And he can't be helped, he can't help but be amazed at this Jesus that they profess faith in and are willing to lay down their life for. And he went to his superiors and said I can't do this anymore. You're going to need somebody else to do this particular job. And they're like what's, what's wrong? What's going on? And there's a first opportunity. He could've sidetracked it, made an excuse, something else. I don't feel comfortable doing it, you know. But he had to say I actually believe them. I believe that Jesus is who he says he is. And I have repented and I've believed and I'm a...I follow Jesus. And similarly to Jesus, knowing what he was saying and the consequence of what was about to happen, he willfully endured the same tortures that he inflicted on others. Terrible things. Terrible things.

But most Christians, we won't endure those things. We won't endure such violence. And we should pray against that. We should embrace it if it comes, but we should not just run to it haphazardly. We should pray for those who do endure it, though. But we live in the ordinary—most of us here today—and the mundane. The very circumstances of our life where we seek pleasure from pain, where we seek good reputations, where we seek the respect from our coworkers and the love in our relationships. The ordinary and the mundane is where we believe or deny Jesus. This is the place we hold fast to Jesus. That he has saved you and [me] with his declaration that he is the one who can save you. Jesus has demonstrated this salvation by willfully laying down his life as an atonement for our sin. Everyone's guilty, and everyone is loved. It is to acknowledge—not just with our head, but to embrace the reality of who Jesus is and the work that he has done on the cross.

This passage and the next chapters of the Gospel are the climax of the Gospel of Mark. And it brings us to a point of true or false. Every human being, it comes to a point of true and false. And to use the high priest's words: What is your decision? How would you judge Jesus? Truth is uncomfortable, but truth is free. When we are standing on the one who has accomplished it, when we are standing and associated with the one who can purchase our freedom, truth no longer has any power over us.....or falsehood has no power over us. The truth of our sin, the truth of our weaknesses, the truth of our challenges that just torment us, the very things that we barely speak to ourselves—all of those things are uncomfortable, but in the gospel there is freedom to stand, not in your own power, but to stand because the one who died in your place stood for you.

Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John, and he did—likewise with so many people who were in leadership positions at the time—he was brought before Roman proconsul. And the Roman proconsul asked him: Swear (meaning curse) Jesus. Swear, and I will release you. And Polycarp replied “Eighty six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?” May we look to Jesus for the courage.



Because the beauty of Peter's story is it's not over. We're going to get there. But right now we are in the heavy moment of him breaking down and weeping. Being confronted with the reality of what he just did, knowing what Jesus said he would do. Not believing what Jesus said he would do, but being reminded by a stupid crow...rooster. Which is very fitting if you think about it. Cocky, boastful, arrogant. Goes about making all kinds a racket. Thinks he owns the place. Peter that night was humbled, but he was not undone, he was not destroyed. Because in the midst of that brokenness there was opportunity for freedom. There was opportunity to live in the love that Christ has loved him with. And he'll be restored later, as we get into the story, but in that moment, that tension of who are you before the face of God comes down to the crisis of who do you think Jesus is.

It is of eternal significance. And I invite you to consider that. If that is something that you have done in your lifetime, then praise Jesus. Continue to hold fast. Continue to have courage to draw on that faith, to think about how you might praise his name and bear witness of his work in your life. It's to prepare, even—not to be too morbid, but to prepare for things. The reality is we don't rise to the occasion. We fall back on training. So are we preparing to be, to have our hearts cultivated by the love of Jesus that will help us to and enable us to endure and to profess faith every moment of our lives, whether it's the mundane or whether it's before someone who has our life in the balance. The gospel is not us dying for Jesus. The gospel is Jesus dying for you.

Let's pray. Lord, we do thank you and praise you. We profess with our mouth and we rejoice in our heart that you indeed are who you say you are. That you are the Son of Man. You are the Messiah. That you are the one who has authority to forgive sins. You have the authority to reign and rule with perfection and justice and righteousness. And you call a people to yourself. And we know your love and may we walk in it. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.