

Bearing Witness Under Persecution

- Mark 14:53-72
- I remember the story Duffy Robbins told years ago about speaking at a youth conference, and asking a volunteer from the crowd to come up and help him. A girl came up and he found out her name was Emma, so he said, “Emma, hold this cup while I fill it with water.” She did and Duffy filled it all the way to the top. Then he asked her to hand him the cup, but as she tried to, he bumped her hand and water spilled on her shoes. He apologized and then said, “Emma, do you know why water came out of the cup just now?” She said, “Well, I think it’s because you bumped my hand when I was trying—” “Oh, there you go Emma,” Duffy said, “trying to blame it on someone else. That’s never going to be the answer, so Emma, try again, why did water come out of that cup when it was bumped?” Emma frowned as she thought and said, “Well, the water was all the way to the top, so—” and Duffy interrupted and said, “Oh, now you’re going to try to use science on me. You know, Duffy, if the surface of the water is level with the top of the cup, and you know, the rotational pull of gravity is in the seventh house—No, that’s not it, either, Emma. Why did water come out of the cup?” She looked like she didn’t have any more answers, so Duffy asked the crowd to give her a hand. When she sat back down, he said, “You know why water came out of the cup when it was bumped? Because water was in the cup. And whatever is in you will come out when you get bumped.”
- Today we see another Markan sandwich in chapter 14, where the two slices of bread are false witnesses at the trial and Peter in the courtyard. The meat of the sandwich is Jesus, bearing witness under persecution. In 9 verses, some form of the word “martyria,” Greek for “witness” is used 7 times. But even when the word is missing the theme is still there. The courage of the Lord Jesus and his faithfulness to the truth stand in stark contrast to the lies of the witnesses and the cowardice of the apostle. If this were a film scene, you see the camera fade in on Jesus being led away to the house of Caiaphas, where he will be tried by the Sanhedrin, and then the camera fades out, only to fade in on Peter following from a distance, right into the courtyard of the High Priest, an area that was outside and below the room where Jesus would be mock-tried. Seriously, this was mock-trial in its worst form, not like the ones that our teens compete in every year. But let’s follow the camera as it takes us first to the courtyard, then to the courtroom, and then back to the courtyard. The trial of Jesus and the trial of Peter have very different results, and we see what comes out of them when each is bumped.
- **The Courtyard (verse 54)**
- “And Peter followed him at a distance.” That tells us all that we need to know, doesn’t it? Peter, the leader of the Apostles, the one who had sworn that same night, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you,” was taking the first step towards denial. His distance from Jesus foreshadows his denial of Jesus. He is in the courtyard sharing a fire with people who know of Jesus but do not know him or follow him. In fact, the same henchmen who had just arrested Jesus and brought him there and would probably later take part in beating him and spitting on him, may be in the courtyard as well, waiting

for their order. James Edwards writes, "Peter has forsaken a discipleship of costly following for one of safe observation." We know how this story ends, with the restoration of Peter, and a powerful witness for Jesus for the rest of his life. But we also know the story doesn't always end that way, so it is a cautionary tale for all of us. When we are distant from Jesus, keeping one eye on him while we stand next to those who couldn't care less about Him, we are in a dangerous place. It is a warning sign that we simply cannot ignore. We sing this song, don't we? *I will arise and go to Jesus, He will embrace me in His arms, In the arms of my dear Savior, Oh, there are ten thousand charms.* One verse I don't think we sing, is this one: *Come, ye weary, heavy-laden, Lost and ruined by the fall; If you tarry till you're better, You will never come at all.* When we are feeling distant from Jesus, it's time to arise and go to him. That leads us upstairs, into...

- **The Courtroom (verse 55-65)**

- We can see clearly that Jesus was guilty in the eyes of the Sanhedrin before this kangaroo court was even called into session. Mark says in verse 55, they "were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death." The problem was, the only witnesses they had been able to find were liars. Mark Twain said once, "A lie can go around the whole world while truth is still lacing up its shoes." So the Council calls in a parade of clowns, one a bigger liar than the next, and they spin their tales about Jesus. But they could find no credible testimony among them because one liar would contradict another liar. One even claimed that Jesus said he would destroy the temple, made with hands, and in three days he would build another, not made with hands. Now if that testimony had stuck, it would be a serious one, as we have seen the temple was the center of the faith and symbolized the hopes of Judaism. What Jesus did say, in Mark 13:1-2, was that the temple would be destroyed, not one stone left upon another. And what Jesus did say in John 2:19, was "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." John adds in verse 21, "But he was speaking about the temple of his body." These two words of Jesus were conflated and so prevalent that even when he was on the cross they mocked him saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross!" (Mark 15:29-30) The point to remember is this: those who do not know Jesus and do not know the Word of God, are likely to say anything about him. What is our best strategy to know that what they say is not true? Know what is true. When the famous song "We Are the World" was written and performed in 1985 by an amazing cast of superstar artists to raise money for hungry people in Africa and in the US, it did just that. \$60 million. But one of the lines was, "As God has shown us by turning stones to bread, and so we must all lend a helping hand." The one reference to God in the song has no basis in truth. Nowhere in the Bible did he turn stones into bread. And the rest of the song was a triumphant praise for mankind, that **we** are the world, **we** are the ones who'll make a brighter day!
- Back in the courtroom, Caiaphas is getting impatient. These false witnesses are blocking his goal of getting Jesus where he wants him, dead and gone, so he stands up, glares at Jesus, and asks him what he has to say for himself in the face of these claims about the temple. Jesus doesn't answer. Why would he? Their testimony was false and did not justify an answer. Jesus maintained silence, just as Isaiah prophesied: "He was

oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth;" (53:7). It will be the same when he is mocked while blindfolded, beaten and spit upon. Saints, we almost never have to answer the lies that are told about us by our accusers. We can follow Jesus' example.

- But Jesus did break his silence when Caiaphas asks him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" In the Greek, the question is put in the form of a statement, with a question implied. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "Blessed One" was a way the Jews would get around saying "God." Caiaphas knew exactly what he was asking, and the irony is that Caiaphas gives one of the two clearest Christological confessions in the Gospel of Mark! "You are the Christ, the Son of God." The other was the centurion at the cross who said, after Jesus had breathed his last, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39)
- Jesus now speaks to acknowledge the truth, to affirm his divine Sonship, and to claim unambiguously to be equal with God the Father. He stands on the Word of God as he quotes from Psalm 110 and Daniel 7, that he is the one who has been and will again be seated at the right hand of God, and he is the one whom they will see, all will see, come again with the clouds of heaven. Jesus says in effect, though you dishonor me, Caiaphas, I will be honored by God. Though you condemn me, Caiaphas, my Father in heaven will vindicate me. Though you accuse me of blasphemy, you instead are the one who has blasphemed. Caiaphas then tears his clothes in religious outrage over Jesus' "blasphemy."
- The camera pans out and shows the bigger scene as the decision is made, the death sentence is given, and the mockery is meted out. The religious leaders of Israel begin to spit on Jesus, cover his eyes and punch him in the face, telling him to prophesy! Remember, many in the Sanhedrin were Sadducees, who did not believe in angels or spirits, much less the resurrection. They took great delight in mocking this man who was said to have the spirit of prophecy. Then they passed him to the guards who had been called in, possibly from the courtyard. And they continued the beating, just as Isaiah had prophesied: "I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out my beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting." (Isaiah 50:6) But Jesus' suffering has just begun, and it will continue when the scene changes again, where we find Peter "below" ...
- **The Courtyard (verses 66-72)**
- Peter is standing next to the fire, trying to be inconspicuous, and suddenly he becomes the center of attention. He is standing close enough to the fire for a servant girl to see his face, which she recognizes. Anyone who had seen Jesus over the past three years had seen Peter walking right beside him. "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." She testifies to the truth. Peter gets bumped, gently. He immediately denies it, and says, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." Interesting word choice, where the first means theoretical knowledge and the second practical knowledge. It's like a child with ice cream in his hand and ice cream smeared on his face, saying to his mom when she asks, "I don't know what ice cream is, and I have been nowhere near this ice cream." It is a total denial by Peter, which is followed by him walking out of the courtyard and farther away from Jesus. When we deny the truth, we move further away from it. At that

moment, the rooster crowed. The first time, the only warning. Peter ignores it and the servant girl follows him out into the entryway. She speaks truth again, this time enlisting others to help her identify Peter: "This man is one of them," she says to the people. So, Peter lies a second time. Verse 70, "again he denied it." The verb tense there indicates he went into a longer denial, and though Mark doesn't record what he said, he said enough to give away his Galilean accent. It's like when Cindy and I are in London, I can try my best to sound like I fit in there, but it doesn't take long for somebody to say, "Hey, you're not from here." (I reply, "How did ya'll reckon that?") Trying his best to hide, Peter is forced out of hiding by his own speech. It's our tongues that reveal who we are.

- "Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." The final truth is spoken, without any doubt, and Peter gets bumped for a third time so that what is inside comes raging out, as he swears and curses, "I do not know this man!" What is implied is that Peter swore in God's name, the worst denial of them all. It is said that "Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay."
- Then the rooster crowed again, and Luke's gospel tells us that at that moment Jesus turned and looked at Peter. Peter remembered what Jesus had told him, that "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.
- This story reminds us of some important truths. First, each one of us is called and empowered by God to be martyrs, the Greek root of which means "to bear witness." The most powerful witness, as this passage teaches us, happens under persecution, when there is a cost we will be asked to pay for standing with Jesus. Second, it is in the simple, mundane everyday things that we can be a faithful witness to Jesus or deny him with our words or with our actions. Third, it is a warning that no one is immune to being unfaithful to the Lord, not even Peter, not even the godliest Christians we know. Fourth, it is a great hope and encouragement to all of us that we are never outside the reach of God's grace. We will fail, and we will fall, but we do not have to fall away. We can be honest with each other, we can weep when we sin, because it is grace upon which we stand. Together. In Christ.
- Prayer
- Greet One Another