

Two Trials By Fire

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[0 : 00] Well now if you would turn back to Mark chapter 14, if you would take your Bibles, page 851, 852. And I am afraid this is not a happy Pentecostal sermon.

I think on a day like this we ought to have a passage that perhaps speaks more about the day of Pentecost. But we couldn't squeeze Mark's gospel completely around our church year.

So I'm afraid we're back in Mark chapter 14 and the main message is that Christianity is for spiritual and moral failures. I know some of you will switch off when I say that but all along throughout Mark's gospel the disciples have failed.

They've been slow of heart, sluggish spiritually. The men, the women, even the author of the gospel himself.

And when it comes to the crunch here at the end of chapter 14 and pressure is on them to stand with Christ, they all run away together. They were called to be disciples to follow Jesus and when the pressure's on they run away.

[1 : 15] And I noticed last week that James, when he was preaching, avoided the first stalker in the Bible. So the verses just before our passage, 51 and 52.

Actually, I think he's probably the second or third. I will take questions on that after the service. You look at verse 50 actually, speaking of the 11. They all fled and left him.

This is in the Garden of Gethsemane. Then verse 51, a young man followed Jesus with nothing but a linen cloth about his body and they seized him.

And he left the linen cloth and ran away naked. Now, tradition has it this is Mark. There's no reason to disagree with it. And I think there's a shocking honesty in this gospel by Mark about his weakness and by the disciple about theirs.

And it's as though something has happened to these men which makes them able to be completely honest and truthful about their own weaknesses.

[2 : 24] And as Mark is writing this chapter and he writes about the failure of the 12 disciples, he wants to say, I'm made of exactly the same stuff. And I think the fact that he runs away naked here is because he wants to expose the deep shame of his own cowardice that same night when he was threatened with physical violence for following Jesus.

Rather than stand up for Jesus, he reveals himself on the pages completely weak, giving into his fears. And I think the reason that he doesn't tell us his name is because he wants us to see ourselves in this mirror so that we won't run away naked.

That's why we have these two trials at the end of chapter 14, Jesus and Peter. I've called them two trials by fire. And they are bound together.

And not just because they happen at the same time, but because the whole purpose of Jesus suffering here before this council is precisely for Peter who fails and for everyone who fails in Peter's shoes.

Peter had come to a place of feeling he was pretty strong. He had not come to accept his own weakness and inability. And every single one of us needs to come to that point of realizing we cannot depend on ourselves before we really follow Christ.

[3 : 59] And I think this night made an indelible mark on the Apostle Peter. It certainly did on the early church and it has on Christians ever since. Not just because of Jesus' stunning faithfulness, his truthfulness and his grace and courage.

Not just because of the contrast with Peter's failure and cowardice. But it's because together the two passages explain each other. See from the moment, I don't know if you noticed, from the moment Jesus called his disciples to follow him throughout Mark's gospel, he's never been alone.

Mark is not about Jesus. It's not about the disciples. It's about Jesus and the disciples as a group, like one set. Because you can't know Jesus apart from his people.

And you can't know Jesus' people really apart from Jesus. So let's look at these two trials by fire.

And the first one, verses 53 to 65, Jesus' trial.

And I've called this suffering. Jesus is suffering because of what is truly precious to him.

Remember, it's in the middle of the night. He's been hauled into the house of the high priest by the guards.

[5 : 08] And he gets there in the middle of the night and the entire council of Israel, the high priest, the chief priest, the Sanhedrin, are waiting there and they're expecting him. These are the finest.

These are the finest in Israel. They are men of learning. They are extremely smart. Key figures in public life.

Major donors. And this little council has the trappings of formality. High priest is there. But it's a kangaroo court. If you look down at verse 55, the result has already been pre-decided.

They're going to kill him. All they need is to scrape together enough evidence from witnesses, like so many other people whom you may know, who've already decided and made their minds up about Jesus and won't let any evidence get in their way.

They've carefully planned it and they've mustered witnesses. The only trouble is they can't seem to get the witnesses to agree. But they still have to follow some process to give the whole proceedings a veneer of legitimacy.

[6 : 13] They've got plenty of ammunition against Jesus, haven't they? I mean, since Jesus came into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey with crowds cheering a week or two before, it's almost as though Jesus has provoked the chief priests.

And after he gets off the donkey, he goes into the temple and he, remember, he stops the temple, he closes it down for a day with his preaching. And at the end of that passage, in 1118, they decide he has to be killed.

And when they confront Jesus with this behavior, he tells them a parable which doesn't back off the point. You remember the parable of the vineyard? He says, you are nightmare tenants.

I am the son of God. This whole thing is mine anyway. They've got to get rid of him. And if you cast your eye back to 14.1, they're looking for a way to assassinate him with the least fallout.

And their big break comes in verses 10 and 11 of chapter 14. They discover that there's one of the 12 who's willing to sell Jesus out for a few pieces of silver.

[7 : 26] And they thought about how valuable Judas' intel would have been. Not just about Jesus' movements. They knew exactly where he was in the garden. But all the inside information about what Jesus had done and said and taught.

You know, I'm sure, no doubt, Judas told them that Jesus welcomed warmly the day when Peter confessed him to be the Messiah. So they've got a lot of information and it's carefully planned and orchestrated.

And all the witnesses are ready to go. But they're contradictory. And as the contradictory accusations pile up, Mark mentions only one which is garbled.

And it's in verse 57. Some stood up and bore false witness against him saying, We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands. He didn't actually say that.

And in three days I'll build another not made with hands. Well, it's a bit mixed up. But the irony is, what these witnesses say is true.

[8 : 35] That the temple made with hands, the physical, material, brick and stone building, which is the source of power and authority for the priests, is going to be destroyed.

And in three days, three days from this time, something's going to happen. Where God will build a new holy temple, not out of stones and rocks, not built with hands, not built by humans, but built by God himself.

In three days time, God will raise Jesus from the dead. And the resurrection of Jesus creates a new spiritual temple. And I only now realize this is what I should have preached on on this Pentecost Sunday. Because the whole stream of teaching in the New Testament about that spiritual temple is us.

It's the church. It's no longer a physical building. The Holy Spirit dwells amongst us. This is where God dwells. But I didn't. So let's go back to the passage.

Verse 6. I'm sorry about that. I'm happy to do it if you've got unlimited time. What will we say to the 11 o'clockers?

[9 : 47] Wait. So verse 60, the high priest stands up and he's annoyed. Jesus is not answering. There's a bit of desperation in verse 60.

He says, Don't you realize, man, that we have your life in our hands? You've got to answer these accusations. You've got to say something. We are. We are the Sanhedrin. Verse 61. He remains silent.

And I think that's partly to fulfill Isaiah. You remember the verse, He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. But I think the other reason is that Jesus never panders to arrogance. He will sometimes graciously acknowledge and answer our genuine intellectual difficulties. But he won't pander to arrogance. And in his frustration, then, the high priest asks a second question in verse 61.

Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And I think the question is utterly incredulous. You cannot seriously believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.

[10 : 57] Yes, yes, yes. We heard you say that parable where you claim to be the son of the owner of the vineyard and we're the bad tenants. We're not stupid. But all your mumbo-jumbo about the temple is one thing.

But thinking that you have a special hotline to God, that you're the one that's come to save us, can't you see how utterly preposterous that is? You cannot possibly think you're Messiah, the Son of the Blessed, can you?

Verse 62, Jesus said, I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds.

And if I was speaking to the youth group, I would say, boom. This is the first time in the gospel, Jesus boldly, unambiguously, unashamedly and clearly states who he is.

And it's these words, of course, that seal his death warrant. The time for secrecy is ended. Now he is suffering.

[12 : 05] It's quite clear what kind of Messiah he is. He claims, I am, which may be the name for God itself. And then he reveals what sort of Messiah he is.

And he quotes a text from the Old Testament saying, I'm the Son of Man. And we're going to look at this as a cross-reference. So if you have your Bible open, put your finger, please, in Mark 14 and turn back to Daniel chapter 7.

Cross-references are very helpful. Depending on how we go, we might have two this morning. So Daniel chapter 7, it's like a cosmic vision of world history.

You cast your eyes down the first eight verses. Kingdoms rise, kingdoms fall. And then we come to the day of judgment. Verse 9. The Ancient of Days, which is God himself on the throne.

And the books are open before him. Verse 10. And then what happens? How does God execute judgment? Verse 13. I saw in the night visions. And these are the verses Jesus is quoting from.

[13 : 21] And behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man. He came to the Ancient of Days, God, and was presented before him.

And to him was given, to the son of man was given, dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples and nations and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall never pass away. And his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. The son of man is the one who sits at God's right hand to whom God gives dominion, glory, kingdom.

On the day of judgment, God hands over the work of judging to the son of man. You see what Jesus is doing? We go back to Mark 14.

In just one word, he turns everything upside down. You think you are judging me? You think I am on trial? It's actually they who are on trial before the judge of the living and the dead.

[14 : 33] And it's music to the ears of the high priest. He jumps up, tears his robe, blasphemy, calls for the verdict, the predetermined verdict. And then in verse 65, the finest citizens in Israel, deeply learned and religious men, began to bash Jesus with their bare hands and to spit on him, punch him and mock him.

So great is the blasphemy that Jesus has just uttered, that they need to distance themselves from him. Why does Jesus take this? Why does he suffer like this? If he's the son of man and all dominion and glory are going to be given to him, why does he allow himself to take this?

The answer is because he's suffering for what is truly precious to him. And what is that? And that's why this next half of the story needs to be held together.

It's for Peter and all like Peter. So we move from Jesus suffering for what is truly precious to Peter, who will not suffer for Jesus because of what is truly precious to him.

Verses 66 to 72. And I warned you at the beginning, it's a painful passage. I mean, it's painful enough watching Jesus suffering. But watching Peter deny Jesus is painful for a kind of opposite reason, because we're watching ourselves.

[15 : 59] When you think about the fact that the main source for this gospel was the apostle Peter himself. And by the time this gospel was written and circulating, Peter was a big cheese. I mean, he was the main apostle, the church leader.

And I think this is amazing honesty and exposure as he faces this trial by the fire. And as it's written, did you notice there's no blame?

There's no judging from Mark. Nor do we hear any motives, any feelings from Peter. It's written with beautiful reserve, because I think the facts are painful enough.

And you've got to give Peter credit. But he follows Jesus further than all the other disciples. When they ran off, Peter has the courage to follow into the courtyard of the high priest.

Takes guts. And you can see how Mark binds the two trials together. If you look back in 54, Mark's, after Jesus is dragged into the high priest's house, Mark shifts the spotlight.

[17 : 07] And we read, 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 in the fire. And already there are signs of trouble, aren't there?

Although Peter is determined, although he is following, he's following now from a distance. And while Jesus is facing the heat inside, Peter is warming himself on the fire outside.

Because, you see, you just cannot follow Jesus from a distance. Peter is pulling back to safety. He's starting to become a spectator, because he's got his own comfort on his mind.

And as soon as we begin to create a distance between ourselves and Jesus, other things become very important, like our safety and our comfort. Back in the garden with the sword facing the guards, I reckon Peter would have, he would have fought to the death for Jesus.

But here, by the cozy fire, Peter opens himself to a very different temptation. It's the temptation to fit in, to not stand out, to become inconspicuous.

[18 : 19] And a young servant girl spots him and says, you're one of the ones who is with Jesus, right? And of course, anyone who'd been in Jerusalem, who'd been up to the temple for the last week, would have seen them together.

And Peter is taken completely off guard. He does not want to be noticed. He wants to blend in. In Australia, we have a phrase for this. It's ALP.

It's adopt a low profile. In verse 68, Peter stammers an answer. It doesn't make much sense in the original.

It's literally, I don't know, I don't understand. What did you say? And then he moves out into the gateway, a little more distance between himself and Jesus. He desperately doesn't want to be identified with Jesus.

And then the rooster crows for the first time. He's just outside. Things are going very badly for Jesus inside. And now a second time, the pesky servant girl observes to the others around the fire.

[19 : 21] In verse 69, she says, he, he is one of them. One of them. Guilt by association. And Peter immediately denies it.

In the original, he goes off on an extended denial. Because Peter does not want to suffer by being connected to that group of people who are around Jesus as disciples.

Please, he says, do not put me in that group. I've never belonged to that group. I've never have. I never will. I do not belong to those people.

Very striking, isn't it? Because embarrassment with Jesus will always show itself in embarrassment with his people. If you try and put a distance between yourself and Jesus' people, you're putting a distance between yourself and Jesus.

Because the root of our embarrassment with God's people is that we're ashamed of Jesus. And then, a third time, some of them around the fire pick up Peter's Galilean accent in verse 70.

[20 : 27] And they say, you are one of them. You're from Galilee. And there's only one way now for Peter to keep his low profile.

It's to completely disassociate himself from Jesus and his followers. In verse 71, he invokes a curse, not on himself, probably on Jesus.

And he swears, I do not know this man of whom you speak. While Jesus is being bashed inside, Peter can't even use Jesus' name, this man of whom you speak.

You recognize yourself in this? I do. It's an amazing mirror, I think, of weakness and failure.

Exposing what's really precious in us.

I mean, Peter was all out to fight for Jesus, but not to suffer for Jesus. He was a boots and all leader, and I love Peter.

[21 : 27] But from the start, Peter refused to accept that suffering would be part of following Jesus. Particularly this suffering of rejection and ostracism and embarrassment for the sake of Christ.

Remember back in chapter 8, the high point when Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ? And then immediately Jesus says, I'm going to suffer and die. And Peter says, absolutely not, no way. And he rebukes him. Jesus says, you've got on your mind the things of men, human things, not the things of God. He says, what's precious to you, Peter, is human judgment, human opinion, human assessment.

So I say to you, if you haven't begun to follow Jesus fully yet, you should know, before you do, it will involve suffering for him. The world in which we live is at odds with God and his ways.

There's a fundamental conflict about how precious Jesus is. There are two radically different views of Jesus. God the Father regards him as chosen and precious, but he is rejected by most.

[22 : 31] That's why some of the best specimens of humanity just hate Jesus. And following Jesus will involve some form of social ostracism.

If you begin to see Jesus in the way that God does, as the center and key to life and all things, if you move to commit to him, it's a kind of betrayal of our species. And you'll step out of that warm consensus of the majority.

This is the temptation, and it stays with us. It's the temptation to be ashamed of Jesus. Even after following him for a long time, the temptation remains. And all Satan's wanting us to do is to try and put some distance between ourselves and Jesus.

And I think the easiest way to do that is for him to encourage you to be critical of your fellow believers. Because if he can put some distance between you and fellow believers, he's begun to put distance between you and Jesus.

And that shift may have happened for some of us. You know, at one time you may have been very keen, the fire burned strong, and you could hardly help yourself talking to others about him.

[23 : 38] But you've grown quieter and quieter about him lately. You're more and more conscious that your friends don't share your view. We've become very practiced at playing down any difference between us and our friends, just as long as I can fit in and not be regarded as weird.

You know, when you pick up your kids at school and you meet friends at the gate, or you see your friends who are not Christians, and they speak with horror at the intolerance of those Christians. It's harder and harder to speak.

You become quiet. You just don't want to be one of them. And the fire cools. And from the outside, we look more and more as though we're just living for the same things as everyone else is.

And if we take our eyes off Jesus and other things become more pressing and more precious, now I think this is a gradual thing. We never actually decide Jesus is less important.

It just happens. And we find ourselves making decisions that are profoundly pagan, have nothing to do with Jesus at all, which really deny him at the core.

[24 : 43] This is how we deny him, to be ashamed of Jesus and his words. Despite the fact that he's the one thing we have that we need not be ashamed of. Or ashamed of openly identifying with other believers and creating a distance between yourself and them.

Brothers and sisters, I think this is where our chapter is so wonderful. Hasn't finished, has it? It finishes with the rooster crowing the second time. If you look down at the last verse, and Peter remembers, literally, he remembers the words of Jesus.

And he breaks down with sobs, heaving sobs. They're tears of repentance. And we know they're tears of repentance because it's not the end of the story for Peter.

It's when he remembers the words of Jesus, even Jesus' words about our failure, that the transformation begins. And I think it is the very depth of the pain of this experience for Peter that helped make him such an effective Christian later on.

You see, by itself, the faithfulness and grace of Jesus cannot change me unless I recognize my own failure.

[26 : 08] In the same way, by itself, my own failure can either lead me to depression or to pride. You know, I'm better than others. But it's the two together. But it's the two together.

It's only when I see how deeply I need the Lord Jesus Christ that his grace begins to change me. Only then can I be truthful and honest about who I really am and about who he really is.

I think this is a brilliant message, actually, for Pentecost Sunday. And I think this is why Mark's gospel is so exposing. Why Mark and Peter are so open about their cowardice?

Because something has shifted in them. They're not trying to build up their reputation or good opinion of others. Something now is more precious to them. It's Christ and his opinion.

And they've learned that Jesus suffered. Yes, he suffered. Precisely for them. That Christianity is for spiritual failures but for forgiven failures.

[27 : 11] For failures who have the Holy Spirit. And it's very interesting, as Dan was talking to the kids, I was thinking, yes, that's right. The first thing the Spirit does is he drives us out to speak about Christ.

I think that's why we glory in the suffering of Jesus so much as Christians. It's our hope. It's like a GPS. It's the one thing that can bring us to the truth about ourselves.

It's where God shows us how precious we are. It's by his suffering we are changed. And I don't always do this but I'd like to give you some homework this week.

Let's do our second reference and I'm just going to finish with this. If you turn right in your Bibles to the book of 1 Peter. It was written later in his life by the Apostle Peter, the same one who denied Jesus.

And I think throughout this letter, Peter has that night of his betrayal on his mind. And my invitation to you is to read through the letter of 1 Peter this week with Peter denying Jesus and then being reconciled to Jesus as we'll see in a few weeks and look at suffering.

[28 : 32] Just let me point to a couple of verses. Look at 3.18. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he may bring us to God.

Well, look at this. Look back at chapter 1. Verse 6. In this you rejoice, that is the new birth from above, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold, that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Isn't that great? Fireside. Good name for church, St. Peter's Fireside. Or how about chapter 4.13? Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings.

That's right. That's right. We share Christ's sufferings. That you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. Verse 19. That those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good.

And as Satan stomps around trying to create a distance between us and Jesus and between us and his people, let me read to you verse 9 to 11 of chapter 5. Resist him, Satan, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

[30 : 18] Do you believe that? Every Christian is experiencing this. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you as Jesus did with Peter.

To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen.