

Betrayal — Denial — Redemption!

Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 14 – Part II

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Mark 14:43-72 NIV

Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders.

Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him. Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled."

Then everyone deserted him and fled. A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.

They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together. Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree. Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet even then their testimony did not agree.

Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

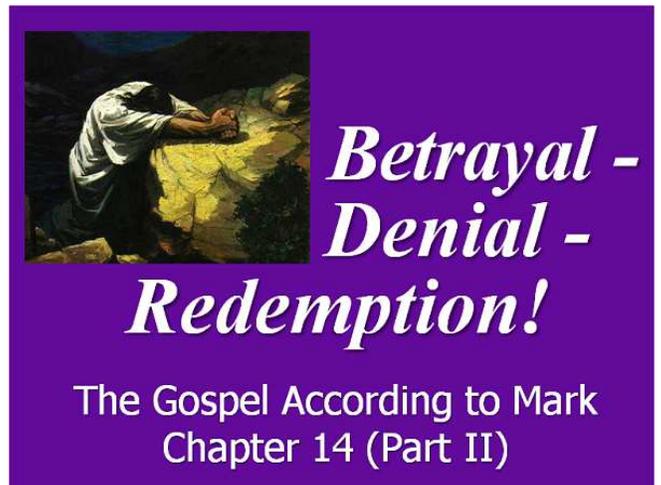
The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophesy!" And the guards took him and beat him.

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about."

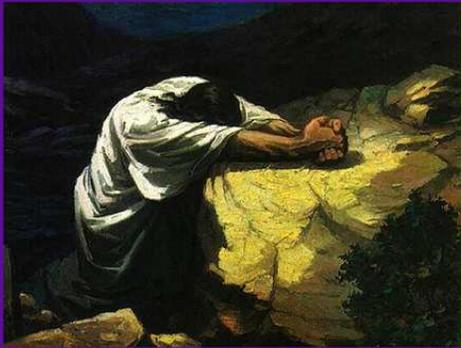
Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

Today we continue our passage through the Gospel According to Mark, with the second part of chapter 14. The next two Sundays are Palm Sunday and Easter, days that require special treatment, so we'll be breaking off with our journey through Mark today.

Let's look back, briefly, to the events we covered last week. Jesus was staying over with friends in Bethany, and during the evening meal a woman entered the house and poured expensive ointment over his head. The disciples — especially Judas — were highly offended by this extravagance, because they thought the ointment should have been sold to provide for the needs of the poor. But Jesus reprimanded them. "She has done a



beautiful thing to me," he answered. "She has anointed me for my burial." Jesus knows where his journey is headed — it's headed toward the cross and the tomb. And he brings that out in the next event of chapter 14, the Last Supper, in which he gives the bread and the cup and tells his disciples, "This is my body given for you . . . this is my blood of the covenant, shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." Then, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus tells his followers, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." And he prays to the Father, "Everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."



"Abba, Father – everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." – Mark 14:36

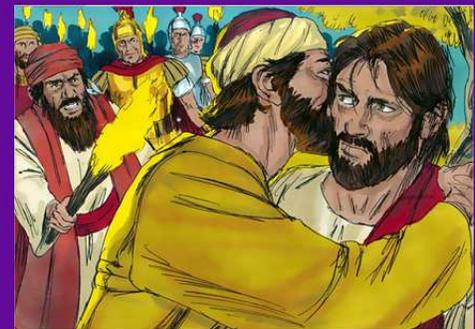
Jesus is facing, at last, where his story has been heading all along from the time he told his disciples, "The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31 RSV).

And so it happens, as our second segment of Mark's chapter 14 relates. Jesus has hardly finished praying when a mob shows up, evidently made up partly of members of

the Jewish high priest's personal guard. Guiding them is Judas, one of Jesus' own disciples. The mob doesn't know which one is Jesus, so Judas has arranged a signal to tip them off: "The one I kiss is the man." At Judas's embrace the crowd seizes Jesus, to cart him off to the high priest. Mark records that one of the bystanders drew a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. John, who seems to have had more information, tells us it was Peter who drew the sword, and gives the name of the high priest's servant, Malchus. As we've seen so often, Mark likes to move his narrative along briskly and doesn't always take the time to fill in the details. I suppose if you and I had been there with the disciples during this dramatic event, we might miss some of the details ourselves.

So the name of Judas has become synonymous with betrayal, portrayed by the Italian poet Dante as tortured forever in the deepest depths of the *Inferno* together with other great betrayers of history like Brutus, who betrayed Julius Caesar. Scripture calls Judas the "son of perdition," and the New Testament records that he met a grisly end once he came to himself and realized the horror of what he had done. But why did he do it in the first place? Mark told us, earlier, that Jesus sent the twelve on a mission to proclaim the kingdom of God, and they cast out demons and healed the sick (Mark 6:7-13); Mark doesn't indicate that Judas was any exception. If Judas had prayed for *you* to be healed, I wonder, would you have rejected your healing and got sick again when you learned what Judas did later on? Not likely — you know that your healing came through faith in the power of God, and Judas had been one through whom that faith was awakened. What happened to Judas to make him do what he did later on?

The Bible never explains Judas's motives, only that it was in the plan of God for him to hand Jesus over to death. So some writers have been sympathetic to poor Judas, speculating what it was that brought him to the point of betrayal. Perhaps he wanted Jesus to be the kind of Messiah many Jews were hoping for, one who would exercise raw power and throw off the oppressive Roman yoke. Then, when Jesus turned out to be another sort of Messiah, with a different agenda, Judas felt he needed to force his hand by engineering a confrontation with the authorities. Maybe Judas expected Jesus to do what, according to Matthew, Jesus told the mob he could have done: "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" But Jesus didn't do that;



Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him. – Mark 14:45-46

instead he replied, "But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way? (Matthew 26:53-54). Without going to his cross, Jesus wouldn't have done what the Father had sent him to do: to take upon himself, as Messiah, the sin and faithlessness of his people Israel, in that way setting them free to do what God had called them to do — to be a blessing to the rest of the world. Evidently Judas didn't grasp Scripture's deepest understanding of the role of the Messiah, and neither did the other disciples. After Jesus was raised from the dead they saw the truth, but by then it was too late for Judas. (For further thoughts on this, read the poem, or dramatic monologue, on the back of today's bulletin.)

While we recognize the role Judas played in sending Jesus to his cross, preachers will sometimes say that we — you and I — put Jesus on his cross by our sin. I understand why preachers use this as a rhetorical device to appeal to people to trust in Jesus. But, in a way, it bypasses the real history the Bible lays out in the Gospels, and in the Hebrew Scriptures they look back to. Paul says that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:34), so we have to understand his death the way the Scriptures present it. Preaching the first Christian sermon in Acts, chapter 2, Peter explained exactly who crucified Jesus: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, *you* crucified and killed [that is, you Jews of Jerusalem and your leaders] by the hands of *lawless men* [that is, the Roman authorities]" (Acts 2:23 RSV). As a fact of history, you and I didn't crucify Jesus; we weren't there. Jesus died because Israel, the people God had called to serve him and take his name to all nations, had failed to do what they were supposed to do. So the Messiah — who summed up all Israel in himself — had to atone for their failure, taking it to his cross.

Does that mean Jesus didn't die because of *our* sin? Absolutely not! As Paul wrote to the Romans, "all have sinned," and that hasn't changed since he wrote. It was *exactly because* "all have sinned," including you and me, that God called Abraham in the first place to begin the process of rescuing humanity. The death and resurrection of the Messiah put God's plan to save *all people* back on track. Through membership in Jesus, we're brought into the redeemed family of God — what Paul calls "the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). Therefore we benefit from what the Messiah has accomplished, even if we weren't personally present at the crucifixion.

Thinking about Judas, though, we can't avoid asking: Is there a sense in which we're also tempted to betray Jesus? Judas gave Jesus over to the authorities for thirty pieces of silver; do we betray Jesus for money by failing to adequately support the mission of his church out of our resources? The writer of Hebrews, speaking of people who turn to Jesus and then fail to keep their commitment and fall away, says "they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt" (Hebrews 6:6). Have we ever made a firm commitment to the Lord, and then backed away from it? I won't press this point, because as I said the crucifixion of Jesus is a fact of history and not an act you and I personally committed. But it's something to think about.

Mark ends his narrative of the arrest of Jesus with a strange feature not found in any of the other Gospels: "Then everyone deserted him and fled. A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind" (Mark 14:50-52). What an odd detail to include



*Then everyone deserted him and fled.
— Mark 14:50*

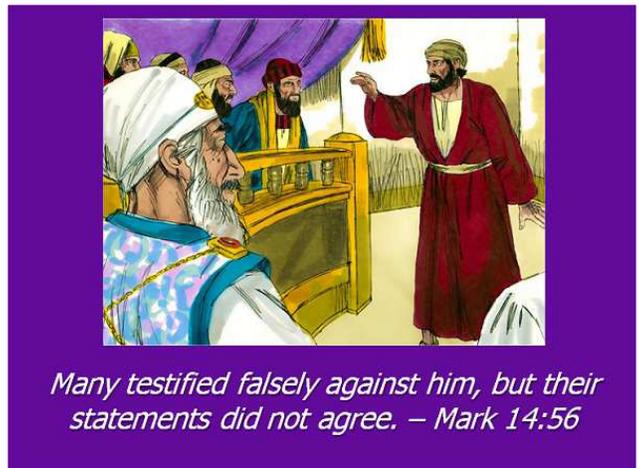
when describing such a momentous event as the betrayal and arrest of the Messiah! Why is it here? First of all, lest we get the wrong idea, when the Bible calls someone "naked" it doesn't necessarily mean what we mean. "Naked" in the Bible means lacking an outer garment, which is what the young man slipped out of in order to escape. Probably he was wearing an undergarment of some sort. We know from a later incident, when Peter denied knowing Jesus, that people standing in the courtyard of the high priest's house had a fire

going to keep warm (Luke 22:55), so the weather that night was cool and the young man must not have been as lightly dressed as we imagine.

I have come across at least two possible explanations of the young man running away “naked.” First, ancient writers sometimes put their “signature” into their work without giving their name. Alfred Hitchcock used to appear anonymously in every movie he directed — perhaps just as someone standing in a group at a bus stop, or walking across the scene in the background. In the same way, some commentators think that when John, in his Gospel, refers to “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” he’s referring to himself without giving his name. So maybe the young man at the scene of Jesus’ arrest who ran away naked is Mark’s own anonymous signature; he’s the only Gospel author who relates this incident.

But there’s another theory. In the early church it was customary to baptize new Christians during the observance of Jesus’ crucifixion, or between his arrest and his resurrection; some churches still follow this practice, baptizing converts on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. In the ancient church, those being baptized went into the water naked (they were separated by sex, of course) and then, when they came up from the water they were given a new white robe. The young man who appears in Mark’s account might be a symbol of Christian baptism, throwing off one’s old “garment” or way of life and preparing to take on the white robe of the believer. I’ll leave you to consider for yourself what explanation of this strange incident makes the most sense.

In Mark’s next scene we find Jesus in the house of the high priest, being interrogated — because we’ve learned long ago in Mark’s account that the Jerusalem religious “honchos” were doing their best to find some way to eliminate Jesus because he threatened their authority. They tried to pin him with the charge that he planned to destroy the Temple, but the witnesses didn’t agree so they couldn’t make that stick; Jewish law required at least two witnesses before someone could be convicted. But then the high priest asked Jesus directly, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” When Jesus answered, “I am,” the high priest tore his clothing and cried, “Why do we need any more witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy!” So the religious authorities condemned Jesus to death.

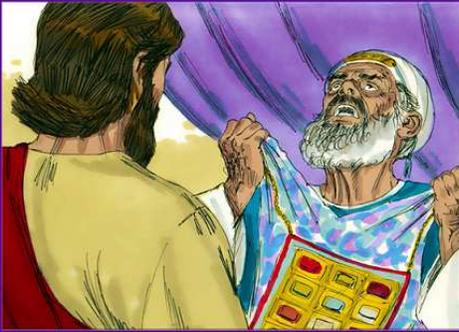


Two things about that: First, it was a false charge, because claiming to be Messiah wasn’t actually blasphemy, which means to speak against God. As we’ve noted, there were ten or a dozen others beside Jesus who put themselves forward as Messiah during that time. Second, the Jerusalem authorities couldn’t execute a death sentence, which under Jewish law would have been by stoning. The Romans had taken away their ability to execute people, so they couldn’t put Jesus to death unless they could get the Roman authorities involved — which, of course, they did, which is why the Apostles’ Creed has the phrase “suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

I’ve always had two questions about this investigation of Jesus before the high priest. First, how did Mark and the other Gospel writers know what went on during this overnight session in the high priest’s house? Mark has reported that all of Jesus’ disciples fled when he was arrested except Peter, who followed at a distance. But while Jesus was before the high priest, Peter was outside in the courtyard trying to get warm and denying he even knew Jesus. Perhaps the clue is found in John’s Gospel, for he tells us that another, unnamed, disciple went with Peter, and that disciple was “known to the high priest” (John 18:15-16). Maybe that “other disciple” was John himself. Whoever he was, he had some contacts in high priestly circles who must have filled him in later about what went on, and the report of that session became one of the sources the Gospel writers depended on when they compiled their accounts.

Second, the Gospels report that the high priest tore his clothing when he heard what he considered blasphemy from Jesus’ lips. That was a customary thing to do when you heard someone utter slander against

God — a sign of your deep distress and anguish to even hear such a thing! But, in those days, people didn't have a closet full of clothes the way we do in our time. Most people had only a few sets of clothing, or if they were poor, only one set — and that's true today in many parts of the world. But the high priest — either



The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" – Mark 14:63-64

Annas, or his son-in-law Caiphas — belonged to the "upper crust" of Jerusalem society, and no doubt he had several sets of robes and other clothing. Did the high priest keep a set of *old clothes* around that he could put on when he was likely to hear blasphemy, so he could rip them up and not spoil his best suit? Or, since this session takes place during the night, was he wearing his nightshirt? Imagine his dismay if he heard blasphemy while wearing his finest robes — "Uh oh, what have I done now? Why did I wear *this* outfit tonight?" I don't know; perhaps this is a bit of silliness on my part, but I've always wondered about it. Think of all the odd things in the Bible we wonder about that have absolutely nothing to do with our salvation (as Paula and I agreed when we were discussing whatever

happened to the head of John the Baptist)! We really should concentrate on the important things, shouldn't we, and not get sidetracked by irrelevant details.

Mark brings what we call his chapter 14 to an end with the account of Peter's denial that he even knew Jesus. A servant girl of the high priest's household recognized Peter as one of Jesus' followers. Perhaps she had seen him in the streets that week while running some errand for her employer; maybe she had even been one who had watched Jesus enter the city on what we call Palm Sunday. Or, very likely, she heard Peter speaking to the others present and realized, because of his Galilean accent, that he wasn't a local guy and must have come with Jesus. "You also were with that Nazarene," she said — that man from Nazareth. And we all know what happened. Peter even cursed and swore, "I don't know him." He had disowned Jesus three times, and the third time, as daylight approached, the rooster crowed — which is just what Jesus had said would happen back in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest: "Yes, tonight — before the rooster crows twice — you yourself will disown me three times" (Mark 14:30). Peter had bragged how he would never desert Jesus, even if he had to die with him. Now he has to face how shallow his commitment has been, and how he's let Jesus down. And, Mark says, "he broke down and wept."



"You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. But he denied it. – Mark 14:67-68

We could use this incident to point the finger at ourselves, and confess how weak our faith is and how ready we might be to hold back from expressing our loyalty to Jesus. Sometimes we get into situations where it might be an embarrassment to make it plain that we know the Lord; other people might not understand, might look upon us as religious fanatics at worst, or fools at best, for standing against the trends of a godless culture. Younger people, especially, face this challenge today in our nation, and we all deal with it to a degree. But I'm not going to go that route.



"God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah. Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Messiah Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins." – Acts 2:36,38

Instead, let's remind ourselves what happened to Peter later on, after Jesus had been crucified and was raised. Instead of the denier of Jesus he became the first preacher of the resurrection, on the day of Pentecost. Without hesitation he stood before crowds of visitors to Jerusalem and announced, "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. . . . God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah. . . . Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Messiah Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:32, 36, 38). From a fearful wretch, cringing before a servant girl's accusation, Peter has become the "rock" Jesus had said he would be, upon whom he would build his church. And, as we read on, Peter becomes larger

than life, such that people upon whom even his shadow fell as he walked the streets of Jerusalem were healed by the power of the living Jesus who was with him (Acts 5:15).

Let's be honest about how fickle we can be when tempted to hide our commitment to Jesus as Lord, the way Peter did. But let's also acknowledge that *the power of the living Jesus* can change us, as he did Peter, into a fearless witness to the truth and one who bears the healing power of Jesus to people around us.

Betrayal — denial — redemption! The resurrection of the Son of God makes all the difference.

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