

MATTHEW 26:57–75. (EHV)

Those who had arrested Jesus led him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the experts in the law and the elders were assembled. Peter was following him at a distance and went as far as the courtyard of the high priest. He went inside and sat down with the guards to see how it would turn out. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they could put him to death. They found none, even though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and said, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’” The high priest stood up and said to him, “Have you no answer? What is this that these men are testifying against you?” But Jesus remained silent. Then the high priest said to him, “I place you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God!” Jesus said to him, **“It is as you have said. But I tell you, soon you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”** Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? See, you have just heard the blasphemy! What do you think?” They answered, “He is deserving of death!” Then they spit in his face and punched him. Some slapped him and said, “Prophecy to us, Christ! Who hit you?” Meanwhile Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant girl came to him and said, “You were also with Jesus the Galilean.” But he denied it in front of everyone, saying, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” When Peter went out to the entryway, someone else saw him and said to those who were there, “This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.” Again Peter denied it with an oath and said, “I do not know the man.” After a little while those who stood by came and said to Peter, “Surely you are also one of them because even your accent gives you away.” Then he began to curse and to swear, “I do not know the man!” Just then the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.

We are continuing our series on Jesus’s passion or suffering between Holy Thursday and Good Friday. In this devotion, we will look closer at Jesus on trial before the Sanhedrin or Jewish ruling council, and what that tells us about Jesus, and at the apostle Peter’s denial of Jesus, and what that tells us about us.

Some Bibles are red letter Bibles. That is, they have all the words that Jesus spoke in the New Testament printed in red ink. If you have a red letter Bible, you will notice that after Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, there is very little red ink. Jesus doesn’t say much. The prophet Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years earlier that he wouldn’t say much: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb he was led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent in front of its shearers, he did not open his mouth” (Isa. 53:7).

But that means that when Jesus does speak, his words are packed with power and meaning. When he is on trial before the Sanhedrin or Jewish ruling council, he says nothing, even though everyone is against him and all the witnesses they call to the stand are falsely accusing him. Part of Jesus’s silence is because it is God’s will for him to be condemned and to

die for the human race. But part of his silence is also because lies tend to be their own undoing, and that is also the case with the lies of these false witnesses. When church leaders wrote books against the reformer Martin Luther, sometimes instead of writing a response to refute their lies, he would simply have their books reprinted, as if to say, “I will simply yield the floor to you. Since your hatred and lies are so obvious, you’re a better opponent of yourself than I could ever be.” Luther was basically just imitating the approach that Jesus took here during his first trial.

But finally, the high priest had had enough of the bungling mess their false witnesses were making, so he simply addressed Christ himself directly: “I place you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God!” Even though it was a move that would effectively accomplish his purpose, he was making two important and somewhat contradictory assumptions—first, that Jesus would say yes, and second, that Jesus would be lying when he said yes.

And Jesus said yes. “Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you have said. But I tell you, soon you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.’”

Let’s not miss how weighty these words are. They are so weighty that they have to have a polarizing effect on what people think of Jesus. There can only be one of two reactions to these words. Either you must believe what he says, or you must tear your robes and judge him worthy of death with the Sanhedrin. There is no middle ground. There is no third option.

Many people think there is middle ground. We hear some performers sing, “Jesus is just alright with me,” even though he is hardly alright with many of the things those performers are doing. John Lennon said, “I’m one of Christ’s biggest fans,” though one doubts it when one looks at the things he did, said, and sang.

People think it’s okay to take a middle position on Jesus, because that’s what many secular scholars, even atheists, have done. They do that in magazines and newspapers when they call him one of the great moral teachers who has ever lived, alongside Buddha, Gandhi, and others.

Even many people who call themselves Christians think there is a middle position, yes, even you and I often think that. We think that when we say or think that Christianity is just one of many ways to God. We think that when we tell our children and friends that we shouldn’t be critical of the beliefs or teachings of others, as if there were no right and wrong beliefs. We think that when we have no sense of urgency to share the gospel with others we know.

In fact, those performers, those scholars, those Christians, and you and I are being more irrational than the members of the Sanhedrin when we think or act that way. At least the Sanhedrin’s response showed that they understood the significance of what Jesus was saying. A middle position shows we don’t have a clue.

Those middle positions are impossible because of the weight of Jesus’s response. If we understand its significance, we can only come to one of two conclusions: Either Jesus is telling the truth and he is the Son of God, which is an every-second-of-your-life-altering confession to make in your heart, or Jesus is a raving lunatic, yes, a liar worse than the devil himself, in which case he is the most dangerous person ever to have lived.

If you think that he was a lunatic, listen to him teach and preach and watch the way he interacts with the poor, the weak, the lowly, the condemned, yes, even his enemies. If you think that he was a lunatic, stick around until Easter morning and see what happens then.

There is another variation of the second response, an even scarier response than saying Jesus is a lunatic. It's the response of the high priest. I said before that the high priest was making somewhat contradictory assumptions. Think about it: If he saved this tactic for last and he was convinced that Jesus would say yes, that means that he was convinced that there was some proof that Jesus was the Christ which would cause Jesus to say yes, because he was also convinced that Jesus would not lie, not even to save his own skin. Yes, it seems that the high priest himself knew that Jesus was the Christ, but he did not believe in him and wished him dead.

But the high priest, the Sanhedrin, and the false witnesses are hardly the only ones we have to criticize. Jesus's own disciple and apostle, Peter, denied Jesus three times, even called down curses on himself in doing so, essentially asking God to strike him dead if he wasn't telling the truth—and he wasn't. And Peter did this even after Jesus had warned him that it would happen, and Peter had insisted that it would never happen.

Only after he had done the deed, and only after the rooster had crowed to remind him of Jesus's warning, did Peter realize the awful thing he had done. While Jesus was telling the truth even when his life was on the line, when absolutely no one was standing up for him in court, Peter was telling lies when nothing more than his reputation was on the line, and he wouldn't even stand up for Jesus outside of the court.

Peter's story is not told for us to shake our heads and say, "How could he?" The fact is that Peter loved Jesus and was no idiot, yet he still did this horrible thing, which means each one of us could too. "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall," the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10.

Oh, the love of Jesus, to confess the truth with his life on the line for us sinners! Oh, the love of Jesus, to be unjustly condemned for our salvation! Oh, the love of Jesus, to forgive us and take us back after when we have blatantly ignored his word and failed to make good on our own word! Oh, the love of Jesus, to remain faithful even when we are faithless, because he cannot disown himself! Oh, the love of Jesus, to remain at his best even when we are at our worst, and to do so for us! Oh, the love of Jesus, to willingly take our spit and slaps and blows and denigrations and denials, so that we might never have to experience any of that eternally in hell!

The actions of the Sanhedrin, the lies of the false witnesses, and the denial of Peter show us that we are sinners. How comforting then to hear the truth from Jesus's lips during his trial that he is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of mankind, yes, our Savior! Amen.