

**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.

When you listen to the Passion history of Jesus or read it for yourself, do you tend to consider each scene in isolation, separate from the others, like I do? Act 1: Jesus celebrates the Passover and institutes the Lord’s Supper. Act 2: Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. Act 3: Jesus is arrested. Act 4: Jesus is put on trial before the Sanhedrin. And so on. Maybe the headings in our English translations help us to view them that way too, for better or worse. I’m not saying I haven’t seen *any* connection between the various scenes; I know that they are chronologically connected, and that they all eventually lead to his crucifixion. But apart from that, I tend to view and study them separately, in isolation. Do you do the same?

That’s why I’m grateful for this year’s Lent series. In our pastoral rotation, I ended up being assigned this text, which puts two scenes together—Jesus on trial before the Sanhedrin, and Peter denying Jesus. And a closer look reveals that they pair nicely together and have a close correspondence and connection, and not just a chronological one. Both are accounts of testimony—Jesus’s testimony before the Jewish ruling council, called the Sanhedrin, and Peter’s testimony before those gathered in the courtyard. Let’s take a closer look at each testimony.

First, you have the testimony of Jesus. Jesus knew that this so-called trial was coming. He told his disciples more than once that he was going to be handed over to the chief priests and experts in the law, and that they would condemn him to death. You can't be condemned to death without first being put on trial and asked to give testimony. Now here he is, bound in the house of the high priest, where the experts in the law and the Jewish elders are assembled.

Jesus could not be in a more stressful or high risk situation. He is on trial before the highest ruling body of the Jews and the high priest himself, and if he gives the "wrong" testimony, they will condemn him to death. He also had to know that, if they were going to condemn him to death, they would mistreat him in other ways too, which they eventually did, right? They spat in his face, punched him, slapped him, and ridiculed him.

In order to get him to give the "wrong" testimony, the Jewish leaders have a bunch of false witnesses come forward and make a bunch of false claims about him. But Jesus won't get involved in the foolishness of these lies. He remains silent.

So the high priest finally stands up and says, "I place you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God!" Here it is—the ultimate opportunity for Jesus to give the "right" testimony or the "wrong" testimony. Ironically, the "wrong" testimony for everyone in the room would be that Jesus *is* the Christ, the Son of God. The Christ, the Son of God, would certainly not support the Jews' subjugation to the Romans. The Christ, the Son of God, would certainly court the favor of these Jewish leaders, not preach against them, warn people against them, and pronounce woe on them. The Christ, the Son of God, would go around with demonstrations of might and glory, not humility, and would certainly not let himself be arrested and put on trial. Take note! These men, these people who had the reputation for being the smartest, most religious, most important people, the experts, *all* had a false assumption—that Jesus was not the Christ.

But Jesus has been charged under oath by God's own representative to testify. So now he speaks up. And he doesn't stop to think about whether what he will testify is the "right" thing or the "wrong" thing, that is, he doesn't think about what these men will think of him or what the consequences of his actions will be. His only thought is, "What is the truth?"

So he told them, "It is as you have said," that is, Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. "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." What they expected the Messiah to look like now, here on earth, they would see soon enough when he would come from heaven, but then it would be too late.

True testimony, but the "wrong" testimony, wrong in the eyes of these priests and elders. "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, 'Prophesy to us, Christ! Who hit you?'"

Let's move outside to another man's testimony—Peter's. Peter also knew that this was coming, or he should have. Jesus had told his disciples earlier that same night, "This night you will all fall away on account of me." And when Peter denied that would happen to him, Jesus told him, "Amen I tell you: Tonight before the rooster crows you will deny me three times." If

Peter was going to deny Jesus three times, that means he would have the opportunity to testify about Jesus three times.

Peter is also in a stressful and high-risk situation. His master has just been arrested by an armed mob. He is now sneaking into the courtyard of the high priest, trying to remain unrecognized as he sits down with the servants and guards and warms himself by a fire of coals. If he gives the “wrong” testimony, he too could conceivably get arrested, or he could be kicked out of the courtyard and be unable to find out what happened to his master, or at the very least he could be laughed to scorn. That’s not nothing. But let’s not say too much. His stress and risk certainly does not begin to approach Jesus’s; Peter’s life is not on the line.

As Peter sits there, it isn’t a duly summoned witness who comes forward in front of a ruling body to question him with lies. It’s just a servant girl, who questions him with the truth. “You were also with Jesus the Galilean.”

But Peter does not ask himself the question Jesus did: “What is the truth?” He occupies himself with the question, “What is the ‘right’ testimony, and what is the ‘wrong’ testimony? What will these people think of me or do to me if I say the ‘wrong’ thing?” So he denies it, and not just to the servant girl, but so that everyone can hear: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Peter then moves to the entryway. And there it is not the high priest who puts him under oath. Another person says to those around him, “This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.” And Peter puts himself under oath and says, “I swear by the Most High God, I do not know the man.”

After a while those standing nearby tell Peter his accent gives him away as one of Jesus’s disciples. “Then he began to curse and to swear, ‘I do not know the man!’”

With all of this testimony, Peter said the “right” thing. He didn’t get arrested. He didn’t get kicked out. He didn’t get made fun of. But it was false testimony, so he didn’t escape his conscience. “Just then, the rooster crowed.” And he didn’t escape Jesus. Luke tells us that, wherever Jesus was, he turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered what Jesus had said. While spit runs down Jesus’s face and parts of his face change color from bruising, his face nevertheless remains set like flint as he stands firm in righteousness and honesty. Peter’s face has no spit and is unbruised, but he is now outside the courtyard with tears streaming down his face as he weeps bitterly.

We can relate to Peter, can’t we? We, too, have had opportunities to testify to our association with Jesus—by changing the sin-saturated television program or walking out of the room in which people are watching it, by standing up for those others are making fun of or slandering, by being more than willing to talk about religion when it comes up in conversation or when people ask us what we believe or why we believe it, instead of trying to change the subject as quickly as possible or remain unnoticed in the corner.

We, too, knew those opportunities were coming. We might object, “Well, no, that’s the difference. I might have given better testimony if I had known the opportunity was coming like Jesus did and like Peter should have. But it came up suddenly and unexpectedly.” But that’s not true. Jesus *has* told us that we’ll be put on trial in the court of public opinion, and that some of us will actually be put on trial and handed over to be persecuted. Peter himself would later write, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope

that is in you.” (1 Pet. 3:15). If we’re *always* to be prepared, that means that the opportunity to testify could come at any time.

And just like with Peter, what we fear isn’t nothing. Losing friends, being singled out, looked down on, made fun of—that isn’t nothing. That’s real loss, and it hurts.

But who is worse off at the end of these accounts of testimony, friends? Who is standing taller and more upright? Jesus or Peter? What’s worse—being associated with Jesus, or *not* being associated with him? Suffering with Jesus now or suffering apart from him for eternity? After all, Jesus says elsewhere, “Whoever denies me before people, I will deny that person before my Father in heaven” (Matt. 10:33).

Let’s return to that moment when Jesus turned and looked at Peter. What do you suppose his face looked like? Whatever was on his face, it was *not* this: “That’s it, Peter. I never, ever want to have anything to do with you again.” No, whatever was on Jesus’s face was calling Peter back to him. Jesus still wants to be associated with Peter, even though a few minutes ago Peter didn’t want to be associated with him. In spite of Peter’s false testimony in a situation Jesus warned him was coming, and in the face of far less risk, Jesus still wanted Peter as his own. Just like he wants all of us. That’s why Jesus is testifying as he is. That’s why he is willingly going to death. He wants to be our substitute under God’s law, succeeding where we fail. He wants to be our substitute under God’s wrath, paying the full penalty for all our failures and sins. He wants to win our loyalty and testimony, ultimately not by forcing it from us with threats, but by compelling us with the good news that he has reconciled us to God and won eternal life for us, and that he is patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

With that good news in our hearts, what will our testimony look like? What would Peter’s have looked like if his heart had been filled with the love of his Savior instead of the fear of his enemies?

“You were also with Jesus the Galilean.”

“Yes, that’s true. And it was time that could not have been better spent.”

“This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Yes, he is my master and teacher. I’m proud to be associated with him.”

“Surely you are also one of them because even your accent gives you away.”

“Thank you for noticing that my accent gives me away as one of Jesus’s followers. My goal is that not just *the way* I talk, but also what I actually say and do would be such an accent that gives me away as his follower and brings glory to him. I hope you hear in the accent of my life and speech someone who has peace, joy, and hope that no one can ever take away from me.”

We can do that fearlessly, because as much power as those putting us on the stand might have now, one day soon they and we and everyone else will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. We know that, because Jesus’s testimony is always the truth. Amen.