

# With Friends Like These

## Mark 14:53-72

*Jesus was condemned and betrayed by people  
who should have known better.*

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We are now almost halfway into the day that changed the world. Remember, we started at sundown, as Jesus and his disciples gathered together for the Passover meal. During the meal, Jesus changed the words of Passover to institute the Sacrament of Holy Communion: “This bread is my body, broken for you. This cup is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you.” During the dinner, he also predicted his betrayal by Judas.

After the meal, Jesus and the disciples walked to the Garden of Gethsemane. He told them that all of them would soon desert him. Peter protested, and Jesus told him that before the night was over, Peter would deny him three times. No way.

In the olive grove, Jesus prayed three times. (Notice how many threes we have in the story?) Tempted by the devil to turn away from suffering, in anguish for the fate of Jerusalem, and scared to death of the violent crucifixion he was soon to experience, he prayed to be released from his trial. But in the end, he bowed his human will to the divine will and gave his life to God: “Not what I want, but what you want.” Then the soldiers showed up, under cover of darkness, to arrest him. Judas betrayed him with a kiss, and there was a scuffle. But at the word of Jesus, everyone calmed down, and they led him away.

Today we will look at the trial of Jesus. It was quite dramatic. And in the background, out in the courtyard of the high priest, there was another drama going on. All of it, the condemnation and the denial, was done by men who should have known better.

I was not a perfect child. I often had to be corrected and disciplined by my parents. Committing the offenses, whatever it was, was bad enough, but the most hurtful thing my parents said to me many times was, “You should have known better.” Not only did I do a bad thing, but I did it unnecessarily. They were always right. I should have known better. It added insult to the injury. It made me feel stupid.

After Jesus was arrested, the Jewish Temple police took him to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest at the time. Ironically, on the way there, they passed through the Kidron Valley, where the bones of kings and commoners awaited the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection at the last day. They walked through the old city built in the time of King

David, and they ascended the hill to the palatial house of the high priest. The steps up to the house of Caiaphas are still there today, and you can literally walk where the footsteps of Jesus touched the stones.

At the house, Caiaphas had called together the 70 elders of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. These men were in charge of the operations of the Temple, more political bureaucrats than spiritual leaders, but they were very well-versed in Scripture and tradition. The fact that they came together in the middle of the night during the festival of Passover was a witness to the importance and the irregularity of the event.

The trial was not going well. Multiple witness shared damaging but contradictory testimony. Jesus stood quietly before his accusers. Finally, Caiaphas himself stood up and questioned Jesus. “Aren’t you going to answer these accusations?” Crickets. “Well, are you the Christ, the Son of the blessed One?”

Then Jesus took the action that he had prayed about in the garden: “*I am, and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’*”<sup>1</sup> That was, as we say in the South, all she wrote. The priests cried, “Blasphemy!” and tore their robes. They began to call for his death. They spit on Jesus and struck him. The guards beat him and dropped him into an improvised cell to await trial before the Romans.

What was their problem? These were the supposed religious leaders of God’s people, yet they could not see God standing before them. They were students of Scripture, watchers for the Messiah, worshippers in the Temple, yet they had the Son of God arrested under cover of darkness and condemned and abused him. They should have known better.

Adam Hamilton writes, “The question we are meant to ask, the question we *must* ask, is ‘How could this happen?’ How could seventy righteous men, dedicated to God, do what these men did? Why did they condemn an innocent man to death? And even if they thought he was a false messiah, why would pious men, pillars of the community, spit on him? Why would they blindfold, mock, and strike hm?”<sup>2</sup>

The answer, Hamilton says, and I agree, is fear. The chief priests, scribes and elders were afraid of Jesus. He was a threat to their power, their prestige, their place in the social order, their wealth, everything they held dear. They had heard how he challenged their corruption, and they had seen how the people loved him. He was dangerous, and the only answer was to eliminate him.

Fear breeds hate, and hate destroys. When you add in the corruption of sin, hatred becomes a description of the human condition. We can see fear of the other, fear of loss, operating in our own history, with the Salem Witch Trials, the Jim Crow laws against Black people, the Red Scare of the 1950’s, and laws designed to punish immigrants or oppress gay and transgender people. So often this fear and hatred is clothed in the garments of religion, as if these hateful people are trying to defend God, as if God needed defending. It doesn’t take but a minute to realize that this story is not about seventy hateful Jewish men 2,000 years ago. It’s about us. It doesn’t take but a minute to realize that if we had been in the house of Caiaphas that night, it is unlikely that we would have done any different.

Maybe a few felt bad for Jesus. Maybe somebody hated to see him treated that way. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, friends of Jesus, may have been there; they were members of the Sanhedrin. But they didn’t say anything. Fear also breeds silence. When we are afraid of consequences, afraid of losing face or forfeiting power, we just keep our

mouth shut and go along. The British philosopher Edmund Burke said, “The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men (and women!) to do nothing.”<sup>3</sup>

Martin Niemoller was a German Lutheran pastor who initially supported the rise of Adolf Hitler. But as the Nazi regime became more oppressive, he began to speak out against their hatred. He was arrested and put in a concentration camp. After the war, he wrote about his initial silence in this famous poem, now enshrined in the National Holocaust Museum: “First they came for the Communists, And I did not speak out, Because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Socialists, And I did not speak out, Because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, And I did not speak out, Because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, And I did not speak out, Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, And there was no one left To speak out for me.”<sup>4</sup>

Fear breeds hate, and fear breeds silence, but listen to this: Fear will not win. Hatred will not triumph. Evil is strong, but good is stronger. Love is stronger. Jesus came as the embodiment of God’s love, and we all know how his story ends. As the letter of I John says, “*God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*”<sup>5</sup>

Peter, bless his heart, was just afraid. He should have known better. He knew Jesus. He had been with him for three years. He seemed the least likely to deny his relationship with Jesus. But he did.

Let’s give Peter some credit. Up to that point, he had been pretty brave. It was Peter who stepped out of the boat onto the Sea of Galilee. It was Peter who made the great confession that Jesus was the Messiah. Peter pledged his loyalty to the death just hours before. Peter pulled out his sword to defend Jesus when they came to arrest him.

But it was a scary moment. Jesus in there before the Sanhedrin. Strangers gathering in the darkness. Accusations everywhere he turned. Finally, he cried out with a curse: “I do not know the man!” The cock crowed, and Peter knew that he had reached the point where his fear had conquered his faith.

In 1942, Clarence Jordan, his wife, and another couple founded a farming community called Koinonia Farms in Americus, Georgia. It was an experiment designed on the teaching of Jesus and the first century church. All property was held in common, and all people were welcome, regardless of race or background. It was a pretty controversial experiment, especially in 1940’s Georgia. They experienced persecution and vandalism. When the problems got into the legal system, Clarence went to see his brother Bob, who was a lawyer in Georgia. But Bob refused to get involved with Clarence and his experiment at all. He said it would not only destroy his law practice, but it would ruin any aspirations he had for political office.

Clarence spoke to his brother as only a brother can speak. He said, “Wait a minute, Bob, I thought you were a Christian. Didn’t we grow up in the same church and go to the same Sunday School? Didn’t we stand there at the altar and say ‘yes’ to Christ together? What did you say, Bob?”

“I said ‘yes,’ just like you,” Bob said.

“So does that mean that you’re just a Christian up to a point?” Clarence prodded.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Bob said, “just up to a point.”

Clarence wouldn't let up. "And that point, Bob, would that point just happen to be the cross?"

Bob looked dejected as he said, "I suppose you're right, Clarence. I will go to the cross with Jesus, but I will not get on the cross with Jesus. I will not let myself get crucified."

Clarence Jordan looked his brother straight in the eye and said, "Then Robert, I don't think you're a disciple. You might be an admirer of Jesus, but you're not a disciple. I think you should go back to the church where you belong and tell them. Tell them that you're an admirer of Jesus, but that you're not a disciple!"

Later, Robert Jordan was elected a state representative and a Supreme Court Justice in Georgia, *and* he became a big supporter of his brother Clarence.<sup>6</sup>

Peter was a disciple, and he failed—miserably. As we all do at some point, or maybe at many points. But the great thing about Peter's story is that his failure set him up for the grace and forgiveness of his Lord, at breakfast by the Sea of Galilee after Easter. Peter became the witness for the Christian faith at Pentecost, a leader in the early Church, and a martyr for his faith. Never again would he deny his Lord. He knew better. His story gives us courage for our fears, too.

The answer to fear is faith in Jesus Christ. Our hope of a love without boundaries is founded on who Jesus is. When Jesus responded to the question of Caiaphas, in one sentence he made three references to the Hebrew Scriptures. The whole assembly knew exactly what he was talking about. When he said, "I am," he was saying the name of God, Yahweh in Hebrew. He was linking himself to God. When he said, "you will see the Son of Man ...coming with the clouds of heaven," he was referring to a vision in the Book of Daniel about the coming of the Messiah. When he said, "seated at the right hand of the Power," it was a quote from Psalm 110: "*The Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'*"<sup>7</sup> Every member of the Sanhedrin got it. Adam Hamilton says, "The Sanhedrin, learned enough to take in the full scope of Jesus' statements and claims, rent their clothes at the audacious enormity of it all and said, in effect, 'Do we need any more witnesses? This man has blasphemed and is worthy of death.' Jesus stood convicted."<sup>8</sup>

By now the sun was coming up on the day that changed the world. Next, they would take Jesus to trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Surely the Romans would see through the jealousy and fear of the Jews and set him free.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:62.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Hamilton, *The 24 Hours That Changed The World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 48f.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/edmund-burke-quotes>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoeller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>.

<sup>5</sup> I John 4:9-10, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from a sermon by Dr. Rodney Wilmoth in my sermon "The Life You Always Wanted," November 26, 2000. See also <https://heroesfoundfaithful.blogspot.com/2010/11/true-saints-never-dwell-in-splendid.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 110:1.

<sup>8</sup> Hamilton, 56.