

Mark 14:53–72 (NIV)

[After Jesus prays in Gethsemane, Judas and the arresting party arrive. Jesus is taken to stand before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leadership.]

⁵³ They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together. ⁵⁴ 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.

⁵⁵ 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. ⁵⁶ Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.

⁵⁷ Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: ⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.’” ⁵⁹ Yet even then their testimony did not agree.

⁶⁰ 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?” ⁶¹ But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer.

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

⁶² “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.”

⁶³ The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. ⁶⁴ “You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?”

They all condemned him as worthy of death. ⁶⁵ 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.

⁶⁶ While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him.

“You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,” she said.

⁶⁸ But he denied it. “I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about,” he said, and went out into the entryway.

⁶⁹ When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, “This fellow is one of them.” ⁷⁰ 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.”

⁷¹ He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.”

⁷² 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.

How could it be? Peter swears his faithfulness to Jesus and then disowns him.

Last week, we saw disciples sleeping in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus steeled his resolve to go through with it. Not just once did they fall asleep. Not twice. But three times. Three times they failed Jesus. And now we come to Peter – whose failures had only begun.

You might recall that after Jesus healed a blind man in two stages, Peter had correctly declared Jesus to be God’s Messiah. However, Peter had failed to grasp that God’s Messiah must suffer and die in Jerusalem. “God forbid it,” Peter had exclaimed, only to be called “Satan” by Jesus for being a “stumbling block,” for tempting Jesus to take another path.

Still later, after many more grave warnings about Jesus’ suffering and death, the disciples had gathered with Jesus in an upstairs room to share the Passover meal. Though it had begun like a normal Passover meal, things had soon taken a dark turn.

Rather than speaking of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt, Jesus had reoriented the meal around himself, as if he were the lamb being slaughtered for the meal. It was his blood that would be poured out. His body that would be broken.

Afterwards, Jesus had led Peter and the disciples to the Mount of Olives on the east side of the city. There, yet again, Jesus had spoken of his death and predicted that his disciples would flee like a scattered flock. But Peter protested. Others may flee, but not Peter. He was the Rock. He would stand with Jesus. He would never fail his Lord! Imagine how Peter must have felt when Jesus had turned to him, telling him that he would soon deny three times that he even knew Jesus.

Probably, even in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter still hadn't really believe that Jesus would end up dead. Surely there must be a way out. How could God's Messiah end up on a cross?!

Yet, Jesus had been hauled away to the house of the high priest where members of the Sanhedrin had gathered to wait for Jesus to be brought to them. As Jesus made his way to his trial, Peter had followed close behind.

When they arrived, Jesus was taken inside. Peter waited outside in the courtyard. As it was a chilly evening, Peter warmed himself by a fire.

After a bit, a servant girl passed Peter and turned to stare at him. When she accused him of being with the rebellious Nazarene, Peter panicked . . . and he denied it.

Not long after, the girl reiterated her accusation and Peter reiterated his denial.

Finally, some of those gathered around challenged Peter. Of course, he knew Jesus. He was obviously from Galilee. What else could he be doing there? Then, to his everlasting shame, Peter not only denied knowing Jesus for a third time, he rained curses down on his accusers and swore that he was telling the truth. Such oaths were taken before the Lord God Almighty.

And Peter remembered his promises. Confronted with his abject failure to stand with Jesus, the Galilean fisherman broke down and wept. Surely, great rivers of tears flowed as Peter let the full weight of his own betrayal fall on him. Yes, he was afraid. Who could blame him? Peter knew quite well what happened to the followers of a failed, would-be Messiah.¹ They were rounded up too. Peter's fear might be an explanation, but it was no excuse. He had betrayed the man to whom he had pledged everlasting faithfulness. Peter would remain lost in his personal darkness until a few women came to him early on Sunday morning, making the most remarkable, even ridiculous, claim.

The Son of Man

Peter's failures are bad enough when viewed in the light of his earlier assertions that he would be with Jesus to the end. But in light of Jesus' determination to speak the truth even as that truth led him to the cross, Peter's disowning of Jesus is all the more stark and ugly.

Oftentimes, the interplay between Jesus and his accusers are pretty opaque to us. We have trouble grasping the deeper meaning of what is said. N. T. Wright helps us get to the depth of the final confrontation between the high priest and Jesus. You might take a quick look again at verses 61-62 in today's passage before going on.

The judges were aware, though, that what Jesus had done and said constituted a veiled claim to royal authority. He was making moves that could only be explained if he thought he was the true King, the Messiah. Now there was nothing wrong, let alone

¹When Jesus was arrested and crucified, he would have been seen by everyone, including his own followers, as a failed, though well-meaning, would-be Messiah, of which there had been several. Amongst first-century Jews, there was simply no conception of a crucified Messiah. Surely, in the hours leading up to and after Jesus' crucifixion, Peter would have thought that his declaration of Jesus as Messiah was simply, though inexplicably, wrong.

blasphemous, with thinking oneself to be Messiah. It might be dangerous, it might even be laughable (it must have seemed both that night), but it wasn't a capital offence under Jewish law. Nevertheless the court knew, and Jesus knew they knew, that if someone claimed to be a king, and the Roman governor heard about it, there could only be one result. Crucifixion, though practised widely in the Roman world for various offences, was the standard treatment for would-be rebel leaders. Hence the chief priest's key question, when Jesus remains silent about the Temple: Are you the Messiah?

Mark is aware of irony here. Caiaphas's question, in Greek, takes the form of a statement with a question mark at the end: 'You are the Messiah?' The words are identical to what Peter said in 8:29. Now Peter is outside, about to deny he even knows Jesus; and Caiaphas, inside, asks the question with contempt, knowing already what answer he would believe.

When he adds 'The son of the Blessed One', this doesn't mean he is thinking that the Messiah will be God's son in the later Christian sense. 'Son of God', as we have seen, is an honorific title for the Messiah, and had been since the Psalms at least. But for Mark, and for Christian readers since, this phrase forms a transition to Jesus' shocking reply—as well as a link with the very beginning of the gospel, where the voice from heaven, repeated at the transfiguration, assures Jesus, and then the disciples, that this is indeed who he really is.

Jesus incriminates himself at once on the political charge. Underneath his prophetic work, and his words against the Temple, he does indeed believe himself to be God's anointed. Everything he has done and said since his baptism has been based on that belief, and he isn't going to deny it now. But he goes much further. He draws together the two key biblical quotations he has already used to talk about the deeper meaning of messiahship: Psalm 110 (Mark 12:36) and Daniel 7:13 (Mark 13:26). The combination is explosive, and gives Caiaphas, in addition to the charge of being a rebel king, a charge he can present to his fellow-Jews as a sufficient reason for handing Jesus over: blasphemy.

It isn't that Jesus has, as it were, claimed simply to be divine (though some have seen the simple phrase 'I am' as an echo of the divine name). It is, rather, that these two biblical texts, taken together, answer all the questions simultaneously, and add to them the assertion that Jesus will be vindicated, exalted to a place at God's right hand. The answer says, in a tight-packed phrase: yes, I am a true prophet; yes, what I said about the Temple will come true; yes, I am the Messiah; you will see me vindicated; and my vindication will mean that I share the very throne of Israel's God. At last the masks are off, the secrets are out, the cryptic sayings and parables are left behind. The son of man stands before the official ruler of Israel, declaring that God will prove him in the right, and the court in the wrong.

Whether or not even this constituted a crime according to any official law-code we will never know. But the court was satisfied. Whatever precisely Jesus meant, they saw it as not only seditious but blasphemous. The insults and mockery that followed were the surface noise. What mattered was that Jesus could now be presented to Pilate as a rebel king, and to the Jewish people as a blaspheming false prophet, leading Israel astray. Mark's readers are left looking at Jesus and Peter in awe and dismay, realizing perhaps for the first time what Jesus had meant six chapters before when he spoke of saving one's life but losing it, or losing one's life but saving it.²

Peter's failure seems the end of the road for him, as the cross seems to be for Jesus. But God is a gracious God, abounding in faithfulness. Jesus will be resurrected and Peter will be redeemed. Indeed, Peter will go on to be the rock on which our Lord's church is built. On the day of Pentecost about six weeks out, Peter, empowered by the Spirit of Christ, will rise to preach a strong sermon that would have taken much courage to deliver. But, by the power of Christ, Peter is made into a new man. For as Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ – new creation! The old has gone; the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). That "anyone" includes not only Peter, but you and me and all those who have placed their trust in the Son of Man.

² Wright, T. (2004). *Mark for Everyone* (204–205). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

The Sanhedrin

(from *Harper's Bible Dictionary*)

Sanhedrin (Gk. *synedrion*), a council of leaders. The term is used in Greek literature in connection with councils of political and military leaders, federated states, and various trade and private associations. It is usually distinct from the town council of a Greek city (Gk. *boulē*) or the senate of elders (Gk. *gerousia*). The Gospels, Acts, and the first-century historian Josephus mention various Jewish bodies identified as sanhedrins, and rabbinic literature has a series of rules in the Mishnaic and Talmudic tractates Sanhedrin that describe the Sanhedrin's composition and function. In rabbinic literature the Sanhedrin functions as a court to decide major cases and to interpret disputed points of law, but the word 'sanhedrin' is used seldom because this body is usually referred to by its Hebrew name, which means court (*bet din*). The NT occasionally uses 'sanhedrin' for local councils of leaders and elders (Matt. 5:22; 10:17; Mark 13:9; Acts 22:5) and most often for the supreme court of chief priests and elders in Jerusalem which, according to the Passion narratives in the Gospels, judged Jesus (Matt. 26:59 and parallels), and according to the account in Acts, examined and punished the teaching and activity of Jesus' early followers (Acts 4-6; 23-24). Joseph of Arimathea was said to be a councilor (Mark 15:43; literally, a member of the *boulē*; it is unclear whether the Sanhedrin is meant). In Josephus both Jewish and Roman sanhedrins abound as ruling councils (Antiquities 14.5.4; War 1.8.5) and as courts (Antiquities 14.9.4-5; 15.6.2), often with a king presiding.

The Sanhedrin in Jerusalem: A variety of theories have developed concerning the Sanhedrin of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. The three most prevalent are that the Sanhedrin was composed of political leaders, including some priests and aristocrats; that the Sanhedrin was composed of religious leaders knowledgeable in the law, including priests, Pharisees, and scribes; and that there were two Sanhedrins, one political and the other religious. All these theories try to reconcile and harmonize a diverse body of data into a coherent description of Jewish institutional leadership from the second century B.C. to the second century A.D. In addition, the first and third theories address a major issue of anti-Semitism by attributing the trial of Jesus to political leaders rather than to Jewish religious leaders. It seems that the attempt to produce a coherent account from diverse and incomplete sources is doomed to failure. The word 'sanhedrin' refers to a series of councils and courts spread over several centuries, composed of whoever was powerful and influential at the time and entrusted with variable powers. Because religion and politics were so intertwined in the community structure, two separate sanhedrins, religious and political, seem unlikely and no direct evidence exists for a dual installation.

In the Gospels: The Gospels attest that some Jewish leaders were opposed to Jesus (e.g., Mark 3:6; John 7:32) but they do not give accurate first-hand information and vary in their usage and characterization of scribes, Pharisees, elders, and chief priests. They refer to the Sanhedrin without giving its precise composition and powers. In Mark the high priest, chief priests, elders, and scribes (14:54-55; 15:1) are explicitly associated with the Sanhedrin in Jesus' trial. In John the chief priests and Pharisees gathered to discuss Jesus (11:47). In Acts the Sanhedrin sat in judgment on the preaching of Peter and John (chap. 4) and was composed of the high priest, the high-priestly family, rulers, elders, and scribes. Gamaliel, a Pharisee and 'teacher of the law held in honor by all the people' was a member of the Sanhedrin (5:34). According to Acts 23 both Pharisees and Sadducees sat on the Sanhedrin. In evaluating and disciplining Jesus, Peter, John, and Paul the Sanhedrin sat as a judicial court interpreting and guarding Jewish life, custom, and law.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Failure. Who doesn't fear it? Who among us hasn't failed? If success is defined as getting straight-A's and making the varsity, keeping a well-paid job with good benefits, staying happily married to one person for your whole life, having well-adjusted children who are themselves successful, staying thin, avoiding wrinkles . . . well, if that is success, then who hasn't failed at something. In a recent essay, Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that we need an adequate theology of failure. After all, though the cross marks God's victory, it was a symbol of failure in Jesus' day. Crosses bore those who had failed in their opposition to Rome. Peter's life as a disciple was marked by one failure after another. If, as we proclaim, the gospel is about a world turned upside-down, what does it mean for our notions of success and failure?
2. You might share a few stories of failure from your own life. What have you learned from failure? What have you learned about failure? How might our failures take us closer toward God? How might our successes take us further from God? Before you answer, consider this. Many Christians came to genuine faith in Jesus Christ only when confronted by failure and tragedy.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Mark 13 Jesus talks to his disciples about what is coming – both in a few decades and upon his return.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Mark 14:1-11 Jesus is anointed at Bethany. This is a burial anointing.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Mark 14:12-26 Mark's story of the Last Supper</p>	<p>Thursday, Mark 14:27-42 The walk to Gethsemane; Peter pledges his faithfulness; Jesus prays in the garden, while his disciples sleep</p>
<p>Friday, Mark 14:43-72 Jesus is arrested and tried by the Sanhedrin; Peter disowns Jesus</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – Participating in the Monday evening Wesley Hall Study on Mar 4 (see below)

On March 11, we will return to Piro Hall, where we meet every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15. We will begin an in-depth study of Mark's gospel on the 11th.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning March 10: *How On Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*

This series will help us to get ready for the sermon series on world religions that will start after Easter.

An all-church Bible Study in Wesley Hall taught by Scott Engle

Continuing on March 4 – not too late to join us!
Monday evenings at 7pm

What Christians Believe

There will even be "can't-miss" music to start our evening.

The series will be suitable for youth and adults.

Childcare available – make reservations at www.standrewumc.org

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
