

America has long been fascinated with courtroom trials. One thing that's interesting about trials is sometimes it's not the suspect who's on trial. In the end, sometimes it's the police or even the attorneys who are on trial. Sometimes the trial takes place in the courtroom; sometimes it takes place on the streets.

It's true in life as well. There may be a time or two in our life where we find ourselves in a courtroom as a juror or key witness or even as the one being accused. But there may also be times when we find ourselves on trial out on the streets of life.

You're having lunch with a group of business associates, and someone asks you why you choose to spend your Sunday mornings at church. There's a hush at the table. You're on trial. You're in the witness box.

Or you're sitting in class at a university, and the professor is butchering the Bible and really doesn't know what he's talking about. You wonder if you should raise your hand and say something. You're not in the courtroom, but you're on trial.

Or you're at a high school reunion, and your old cronies see that as an opportunity to drink like a fish and joke about things in your past you'd rather forget, what do you say? They don't know it, but you know your faith is on trial.

In our study of the gospel of Matthew, we come to the trial of Jesus of Nazareth. No trial in history has held such significance for the human race as this one. Jesus would first stand before the Jewish ruling council, called the Sanhedrin. Later, he would stand before the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. Jesus was on trial, and his life hung in the balance.

But there was another trial going on that night. While Jesus stood trial before the Sanhedrin, Peter, his lead disciple, stood trial out in the courtyard. While Jesus came through his trial as a faithful witness, Peter stumbled badly. Matthew wove these two stories together because he wanted to teach us something of what it means to be a faithful witness and what makes the difference between courage and cowardice when the heat is on.

The Trial of Jesus

The Setting

It's Thursday night. Jesus was just arrested in Gethsemane. The disciples had fled. Jesus was then bound and led across the Kidron Valley to Jerusalem. Other gospel writers tell us he was first taken to the home of Annas, the former high priest, and

then to the home of Caiaphas, his successor. Matthew picks it up there.

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. Matthew 26:57-58

Caiaphas was a powerful man. He presided as high priest for 19 years, far beyond the normal four years. That night, in his home, an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin was called. We can see them scurrying in by torchlight from every corner of the city. The Sanhedrin was made up of 71 men—priests, elders, and scribes. Though this had all the trappings of an official proceeding, things weren't being done right. In their eagerness to get rid of Jesus, they broke many of their own rules. Later law stipulated it wasn't legal to make final judgments at night or outside the chambers of the Temple. Nevertheless, they began the charade.

But Matthew also brought Peter into focus. After fleeing, he made a U-turn and followed Jesus at a distance into Caiaphas's courtyard. This was risky. It seemed Peter was still committed to making good on his promise not to forsake Jesus. Just a few hours earlier, Peter had lopped off the ear of the high priest's slave. Now he was in the high priest's courtyard sitting with the guards. Other gospel writers said he sat by the fire, warming himself.

The False Testimony

As Peter sits in the courtyard, Matthew describes what was going on inside Caiaphas's house.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent. vv. 59-63a

These verses focus on the testimony of the witnesses who just happened to be available in the middle of the night. The whole point was to find cause to put him to death. But this trial wasn't going well for the Sanhedrin. These were false witnesses; other

gospels say they couldn't get them to agree on anything. In Jewish court, it was required that two or more witnesses agree. You can sense their blood pressure rising. Jesus hasn't said a word, but he's winning!

Finally, it looked like they had something. Early in Jesus' career, he said, "*Destroy this Temple, and I will raise it again in three days*" (Jn. 2:19). The Jews thought he was speaking of the literal Temple, but he was speaking of his own body. On another occasion, Jesus predicted the Temple's destruction (Mk. 13:2). The Temple was a big deal to these people. This is like someone threatening to blow up the White House and Federal Buildings. A mere threat against the Temple was punishable by death, and notice two witnesses agreed on this.

It's interesting that this is the best they could come up with. There's really no sin they could accuse him of. He was flawless, above reproach. Once he asked his enemies, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" There was silence. Someone might say, "Well, they didn't know him that well." But one would later say, "*He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth*" (1 Pet. 2:22). That's quite a statement from one who spent pretty much every waking moment of three years with him.

When the high priest pressed him to answer to this charge, Jesus was silent. There's a part of us that wants to shake him, "Jesus, defend yourself. Here's your opportunity." Why the silence? Perhaps he knew it would accomplish nothing; perhaps he was aware of Isaiah's prophecy, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Is. 53:7). Above all, his silence reveals his total surrender to what he knew the Father had in store for him.

The Question

Finally, frustration level rising even more, Caiaphas takes over the proceedings.

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." vv. 63b

Caiaphas demands Jesus respond to the charges. He even puts him under oath by the living God. He asks, "Are you the Messiah? Are you the Son of God?" The "you" is emphatic. In other words, "You, a helpless prisoner, a nobody from Nazareth in Galilee, are you the Messiah, the Son of God?"

That question was a ticking bomb. If Jesus refused to answer a question with such an oath, Caiaphas could use his refusal to answer as a criminal offense. If Jesus said no, he'd be lying. And if Jesus said yes, he'd be charged with blasphemy. Today, this is where a defendant pleads the Fifth: "I refuse to answer on the grounds that it may incriminate me."

But this time Jesus does respond, and he does incriminate himself.

"You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." v. 64

Jesus doesn't need an oath to tell the truth. And with this, Caiaphas's mouth must have hung open in surprise and pleasure: "Now we've got something we can use," he thought. It's one thing to say, "You have said so," but then Jesus dug himself further into a hole. He calls himself the Son of Man and puts together two Old Testament passages. Psalm 110 speaks of the Messiah, God's Son, sitting at God's right hand, the place of authority and honor. Daniel 7:13 speaks of One coming in the clouds, enthroned and given dominion, glory and a kingdom. In essence, Jesus said, "You're now standing in judgment over me, but soon I'll be standing in judgment over you." This is without a doubt one of the clearest declarations of his authority and divinity in the New Testament.

The Verdict

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?" vv. 65-68

Caiaphas is a slimy hypocrite, and he pretended to be horrified, tearing his robe from top to bottom. But in reality, he was relishing in his good fortune. No more evidence was needed. This was blasphemy. Jesus put himself in a position of judge and thus degraded the name of God. Blasphemy was worthy of death in Jewish law.

Some of the Sanhedrin then began to spit on him and beat him. They blindfolded him and said, "Prophecy!" Again, Jesus is silent. The ironic thing is he had prophesied they'd do the very thing they were doing. Months earlier he said the chief priests would "*mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him*" (Mark 10:34).

Jesus was a faithful witness. His faithfulness was seen in the integrity of his life, and in his silence when it came to defending himself. Years later, Peter wrote, "*When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly*" (1 Peter 2:23). His faithfulness is seen in his submitting to his Father's will when, as he said earlier, he could call down twelve legions of angels. It's also seen in his frank admission that he was the Messiah when he knew it would set them off. This is courage. This is strength under fire. We might say, "Well, Jesus was God. Of course, he'd be faithful. How could he be anything but faithful?" That's not how it worked. As a man, Jesus felt the same pressures we feel and could have succumbed.

Where did he get his strength? Jesus is a picture of something for us. He's a picture of strength being made perfect in weakness. Don't forget, he was fully human. His weakness was what kept them all from believing he was the Son of God. They had no concept that the Messiah could be weak and vulnerable as Jesus was at that moment. That didn't fit the profile! This was a stumbling block for man, but this was the secret of Jesus' strength. Throughout his earthly life, Jesus made it clear he relied on his Father. He said, *"I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone..."* (John 8:26-28).

So, that's the trial of Jesus before the high priest and the Sanhedrin. Though the Sanhedrin think they've won the trial, we know Jesus was the real winner. Jesus stayed true to his calling and mission. Jesus was a faithful witness! In contrast, Matthew then switched to another trial — the trial of Peter.

The Trial of Peter

Peter's Fall

Don't forget who this was. Peter loved Jesus. He'd dropped his fishing nets to follow Jesus. He was the first to confess Jesus as Messiah. Along with James and John, he was part of Jesus' inner circle. Though his methods were off, he alone drew his sword and struck the high priest's slave. And it was love for his Lord that took him into the courts of the high priest that night. Yet it was here, in the courtyard, Peter's resolve melted.

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away." Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly. vv. 69-75

One of the things I love about this is it just shows the accuracy of the gospels. I mean if they were making this stuff up, who'd write this about one of the leaders of the early church?

But, let's look more closely at Peter's trial. Notice there was a progression in his denials. He started by claiming ignorance: "I don't know what you're talking about." Next, unlike Jesus, he takes an oath and denies association with Jesus, who he calls "the man." By the way, Jesus warned against taking oaths. In the gospel of Matthew, only bad guys took oaths. Finally, Peter called down curses and swore he never even knew this man. That could mean

either he cursed himself if he was lying, or that he cursed Christ. Early Christians under persecution were actually asked to deny Christ by cursing him. Imagine Peter falling so low he'd curse Jesus! Either way, his fall was dreadful. While Jesus testified faithfully before the mighty Sanhedrin, Peter faltered before a mere slave girl. While his Lord stood true and was condemned to death, Peter withered and got away scot-free. Mighty Peter, the rock, had fallen.

We've all done it. A nice dinner party, a few glasses of wine, lots of buzz in the room. Then a few questions from people you hardly know. "You're not one of those Jesus freaks, are you? I mean no one really believes that stuff anymore." "It's nice to go to church occasionally, but you don't take it to extremes, do you?" "You believe in all religions, right?" If you're like me, you've been in that kind trial, and you haven't always done so well.

Peter's Problem

Why do we fail? Why did Peter fall? Peter fell because, in contrast to Jesus, he was operating in his own strength. Peter is a picture for us of what the flesh always produces. The rooster is a symbol of pride. Our prideful flesh always falls short in the things of God.

This is something we see throughout the Bible. Moses had to learn this. In the book of Exodus, as he was leading the people of Israel towards the Promised Land, the Amalekites attacked Israel. Moses ordered Joshua to choose some men and go out and fight them. Meanwhile, Moses said he'd stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in his hand. He took Aaron and Hur with him. As the battle raged below, when Moses held his hand up with the staff, Israel prevailed, but when he lowered it to rest, they lost ground. Now Moses was an old man, and it was hard to keep his hands up. So they sat him down, and Aaron got on one side and Hur on the other, and they held up his arms. As a result, Israel overwhelmed Amalek (Exodus 17:8-13).

This is an object lesson. The holding up of Moses' arms is a picture of depending on the Lord rather than our own strength. The proud strength of man will always lose the battle, but God's strength is manifest in human weakness and dependence.

We see it again with Gideon. God sent Gideon out to fight the Midianites. He gathered about 32,000 soldiers and headed out. Then God said, "Gideon, you have too many people for me to give you victory. With an army like this, you're going to think it was your own strength that won. So, tell the people that whoever is just a little afraid can go home." Gideon got rid of 22,000 soldiers that way.

Then God said, "You still have too many men. Go down to the water and tell them to drink, and whoever laps the water with his tongue like a dog send home, but whoever cups the water in their hand and brings it to their mouth take into battle." That left just 300 men who went out to war. Guess what? They destroyed the Midianites. (Judges 7:2-8)

What's God saying? The strength of man gets in the way of the power of God; God's strength is seen in human weakness.

Jesus emphasized this with his disciples. That same night before he was arrested, he said to his disciples, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). Peter missed that. Maybe he was dozing off. Maybe he was thinking of how he was going to rescue Jesus. But Jesus had given him the secret of true courage and power right here. It wasn't about his commitment, resolve, courage, or skill. It was about depending on God.

What will it take for us to learn this lesson? I've found God lets me fail when I insist on operating in the flesh to show me how weak I am. I had a vivid example of that at an outdoor Easter service years ago. The worship was great, the numbers were great, and I thought I was pretty good too. After the service, I changed my clothes and went over to the baptism in the lagoon. A bunch of us were standing around, waiting to get started, and I noticed a few of our junior high kids. They had a bottle of hot sauce one of them had picked up on the Mexican border, and they were horsing around and talking about how hot it was.

I like hot food. I never find hot sauce that is hot enough. And I was feeling pretty good about the whole morning. I was riding high, strutting like a rooster. So I said, "Let me see that stuff." They all got very concerned. But just to show what a man I was, I opened the bottle and chugged it. The minute it hit my mouth I realized this was a new level of hot! My lips began to burn and then went numb, but I could handle it.

So, I got in the water and started to baptize. Immediately, I knew I was in trouble. My stomach began to turn. I got very dizzy. People noticed me turning white. I was in freezing water but sweating up a storm. I knew I had to get out, and I did. Everyone watched as I ran down the dock and hung my head over the side. The only consolation was those boys felt worse than I did. They were all convinced they'd poisoned the pastor!

But what an idiot! It was done out of human pride. When we operate that way, sooner or later we fall. Many of us are like Peter. We know Christ. We love Christ. We're committed to Christ. We might even think we'd die for Christ. But we haven't learned how weak we are. We haven't learned to let go of all the things in our natural selves that make us feel confident we can be effective for Christ. And so, out of his grace, he lets us fall so we can learn this lesson. We may fall in our career, our marriage, or our ministry; any area where we've become smug and self-reliant.

It's not always easy to know if you're operating in your own strength or in God's strength. But I think there are few clues.

First, is prayer. Peter's threefold denial was preceded by three missed opportunities to pray. Jesus said to him in the garden, "Keep watching and keep praying that you may not enter into temptation." If I move into a situation without prayer, I'm operating in my own strength.

Second, is the control factor. If I move into a situation trying to control the outcome, and I'm irritable and frustrated when things don't go my way, I know I'm operating in the flesh. When we're depending on God, there's a restfulness in our spirit. We know he's in charge. We can let go. It's about him, not us.

This leads to the third thing: the fruit of the Spirit. If you're operating in God's strength, the fruit of the Spirit will be evident: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. We see these fruit in Jesus at his trial. We'll see this in us as we depend on his strength rather than our own,

Finally, the fourth thing is power. When we're depending on God, the result may not be what we expected or even hoped for, but it will be something we know we couldn't have done. God's power will be evident. People will be drawn to him, not so much to us. These are the signs.

Vance Havner, once said, "The Lord had the strength and I had the weakness, so we teamed up. It was an unbeatable combination."

The greatest preacher and missionary to ever live, the Apostle Paul, put it this way, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7).

Have you learned this lesson? Our own strength always falls short in the things of God, but God's strength is manifest through human weakness. That's why Jesus was a faithful witness in his trial, and Peter faltered in his.

The good news is Jesus wasn't finished with Peter yet. Peter's tears were a sure sign God was still at work in him. Those were tears of repentance. That's what set him apart from Judas. Judas might have felt remorse, but there was no repentance. And wherever you are at, whatever failure you've experienced, you may have even cursed Christ, he can restore you, and he can teach you this lesson. Your flesh, your strength will always fall short in the things of God, but the strength of God will shine through your weakness.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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