

Series: The Cross

March 26, 2017

Title: The High Priest's Palace

[Slide 1]

Text: Mark 14:53-72

The High Priest's palace

Midnight: April 3, A.D. 33

A ragged band of men climbed up out of the deep valley east of the Temple. They were armed with a hodge-podge of spears, swords and clubs. Some carried torches to light their way. They had accomplished their mission: to find and arrest Jesus of Nazareth. Now they were delivering Him to the High Priest for trial.

One lone disciple followed at a safe distance. He watched as the men shoved Jesus through the city gate, then insinuated himself into the growing crowd of curiosity-seekers who poured into the narrow streets.

Peter had made a bold promise just hours before. He had assured Jesus that no matter what happened, he would never abandon his Master. Nothing would ever come between them, not even death. Now he was desperately trying to keep that promise.

The High Priest's palace:

Mark tells us Peter's own story of that awful night:

[Slide 2]

Mark 14:54 NIV

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.

In the 1970's archaeologists unearthed a magnificent palace not far from the place where the Temple once stood. This palace is the largest private residence ever excavated in Israel, with some 13,000 square feet of living space. It was built around a paved courtyard, and included a ornate Reception Hall that measured 33' by 21'. Its walls were decorated with white stucco, some of which remains preserved to ceiling height.

Based upon its location and opulence, it could very likely be the palace of Jerusalem's most powerful person: the high priest. If so, then it was in that very courtyard that Peter huddled around a fire pit while Jesus was put on trial in the Reception Hall.

Two trials:

Not one, but two trials would take place in the Palace that night. Jesus would stand trial before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jewish people. Peter would stand trial in palace courtyard, interrogated by a servant girl and other bystanders.

The two trials would reveal the true identity of both men. Jesus would be sentenced to death for remaining true to His calling. Peter would save his skin by denying he had ever been Jesus' disciple.

The Trial of Jesus

A verdict in search of evidence:

Chaos comes in many forms. None is more infuriating than having people lie about you to your face. This is what Jesus faced when He was brought to trial in the middle of the night at the palace of the high priest.

The trial was conducted by the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was made up of a cross section of the most influential and powerful people in Jerusalem. The high priest presided over the court. They sat in a semi-circle, with the accused placed in the middle. One by one, witnesses were brought in to give their testimony. A witness's testimony had to be confirmed by that of at least one other in order to be considered admissible.

And this is where the troubles began for the High Priest and his plan to quickly condemn Jesus to death:

[Slide 3]

Mark 14:55 NIV

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

Finally, a possible charge emerged that might do the trick:

[Slide 4]*Mark 14:57-58 NIV**Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.'"*

But even these witnesses couldn't get on the same page. Their statements didn't agree with each other.

The Final Witness:

Up to this point Jesus had steadfastly refused to respond to the lies of the many false witnesses. Perhaps the High Priest had hoped that the enormity and outrageousness of the many lies would have goaded Jesus into talking. And if He got flustered, perhaps He would slip up and condemn Himself with His own words. But Jesus had remained silent.

There was one more option: ask Jesus to testify. It was risky, of course. Would Jesus actually admit to anything that would lead to the death penalty?

With the trial on the line, the High Priest called the Final Witness:

[Slide 5]*Mark 14:61b-62 NIV**Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"**"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."***The Verdict:**

With that answer Jesus sealed His fate. This was the moment He had envisioned in Gethsemane. He made His choice before He ever stood in front of the Sanhedrin. As soon as He gave His answer, the high priest called for the court to give its verdict, and they immediately condemned him to death.

So what was so damning about Jesus' response? Judaism of that time expected the coming of the Messiah. But they believed that *only God* had

the right to announce and enthrone the Messiah King. Hadn't they just heard Jesus claim messiahship for Himself?

Furthermore, when the Messiah came, he would prove his messianic identity. This prisoner from Galilee, abandoned by His followers and standing helpless before them could not possibly be God's Messiah!

In fact, however, Jesus *did* offer divine evidence of His calling as Messiah. In His answer Jesus predicted that they – the Sanhedrin – would one day see Him sitting at God's right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven.

So just whose fate was sealed that night in the palace of the High Priest?

- Was it Jesus, now condemned in a Jewish court and soon to be sentenced to crucifixion by the Roman governor, Pilate?
- Or was it the High Priest and his crowd, when they one day found themselves facing God's true Messiah?

The Trial of Peter

Peter on trial:

Meanwhile, another trial was taking place out in the courtyard of the palace. It was a cold spring night, and the High Priest's servants had lit fires in a large bronze basin or fire pit to provide some warmth. Peter huddled around the fire, straining to hear the proceedings of the court. The light of the flames flickered on his face.

And that is when one of the high priest's servant girls happened to walk by. When she saw Peter, she stopped and stared intently at him. Then Peter's trial began:

[Slide 6]

Mark 14:67b NIV

"You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said.

It was an accusation that carried with it the possibility of being put to death alongside Jesus. It was also a simple statement of fact. Peter was "with that Nazarene, Jesus."

Peter replied, using a legal expression to protest his innocence:

[Slide 7]*Mark 14:68 NIV**But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway.*

Somewhere in the distance, a rooster began crowing.

Peter's verdict:

For Peter things would only go from bad to worse. The servant girl wouldn't let him alone. She had smelled him out and was determined to expose him as a follower of Jesus. When she told bystanders that he was "one of them," Peter denied again. Then, when they joined in attacking him, Mark tells us:

[Slide 8]*Mark 14:71 NIV**He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about."*

Somewhere in the distance, the rooster crowed the second time. Peter suddenly found himself confronted with the verdict of his courtyard trial: by his own words he had condemned himself as a denier of Jesus. He had refused to even say His name.

*Mark 14:72 NIV**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.***Making our choice:**

Temptation is a complex thing. We feel drawn, maybe even compelled, to do something we know we shouldn't. For a brief moment, there is still the possibility of escape; the trap has not yet sprung shut. Did you ever watch a movie of a fly walking around inside a Venus Fly Trap? It doesn't have a care or a clue. If it just flew away, no harm done. But it doesn't. Instead, it wanders around until it sets off the trap's trigger hairs. And then there is no escape.

Peter had a brief moment in time when he could have escaped the trial and failure in the courtyard. Jesus gave him fair warning. Jesus offered him time to pray that he not fall into temptation. But like the clueless fly strolling around inside the Venus Fly Trap, Peter blundered right into Satan's lair. Snap went the trap: all it took was an overly curious servant girl and some firelight. Peter unraveled like an old sock until there was nothing – no one – left.

Like Peter, we face temptations. And in every situation God has promised that there is an escape hatch. Paul writes:

[Slide 9]

1 Corinthians 10:13 NIV

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Did you get what Paul is saying? We *endure* by taking the *way out*. Stay in the place of temptation long enough and you will eventually fall. Will power is a mental muscle that gets tired and gives up. That is why God provides a way out. That is why Jesus offered Peter the escape hatch before the trial was too much for him.

So, when temptation comes, take time to *pray*! God will show you the way out. He will never lead you into temptation, but will always offer to deliver you from evil. The same Jesus who stood strong against the temptation to deny His calling as Messiah, is present to help you when you need Him. The rest is up to you!

LIFE Group Lesson for “The High Priest’s Palace”

Icebreaker:

- What is the food that you find most tempting? How do you handle that temptation?

An Exodus lesson on temptation:

- Humans have been dealing with temptation ever since the Garden of Eden. Paul brings up the subject with the Christians in Corinth, using the Exodus journey as an example. He singles out four ways in which the Israelites failed the test of temptation;
 - *1 Corinthians 10:6-10 NIV*
 - *Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.*
 - *Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.”*
 - *We should not commit sexual immorality as some of them did – and in one day twenty-three thousands of them died.*
 - *We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes.*
 - *And do not grumble, as some of them did – and were killed by the destroying angel.*
- In each case, the people who gave into temptation made a choice to forget why they were on this Exodus journey. They were tempted by the paganism around them, by sex, by putting God to a test, and by copping a bad attitude: all things that we all face from time to time.

The keys to overcoming temptation:

- Paul goes on to apply these failures to the lives of Christians:
 - *1 Corinthians 10:11-13 NIV*
 - *These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.*

- *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!*
- *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*
- So what are the keys to overcoming temptation?
 - First, remember that you are not the first person to experience this kind of temptation. What happens to you is "common to mankind."
 - Second, God is on your side! He is faithful. He will never lead us into temptation. He will always deliver us from evil if we just give Him the chance.
 - Third, if you stay in a place of temptation long enough, it will become more than you can bear. No one can hold out forever.
 - Fourth, God will give you a "window of escape" that you must choose to jump through in order to resist the temptation.
 - Fifth, enduring temptation does *not* mean putting yourself in a compromised situation and seeing how long you can "endure" it. It means taking the "way out" that God has faithfully provided.

Prayer time:

- Take some time to pray for each other that the Lord will help you choose the way out of temptation when it comes.
 - This might mean choosing to forgive someone for a past hurt instead of obsessing on your grievances.
 - It might be handing something over to God instead of worrying all night about it.
 - It might mean resisting the impulse to eat, shop, over-work, procrastinate, etc.
- Thank the Lord for His faithfulness in providing a way out!