

Betrayal  
(Part 3)  
Read Mark 14:53-72

Torches ahead, linked like an animated coil of luminous rope that is wriggling its way downward, kept Peter from losing sight of Jesus, but not from straying off and stumbling on the trail from Gethsemane. After a time, the coil of lights entered a courtyard. Peter, some minutes behind, shifted past gates and hesitated as he took a seat by some of the officers who had arrested Jesus. By a fire he warmed a body trembling with the chill of the cold and the shock of unanticipated events. At the same moment, Jesus was standing before the high priest and his cohorts.

The high priest scowled with ill humor in a chamber meant for far fewer than the number of bodies packaged within. *Not one of these slithering reptilian forms can keep their testimonies consistent!* he thought with disgust. Despairing of the lack of conformity among the witnesses against Jesus, the high priest used bravado in order to ask Jesus, “Do you not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against you?” The high priest peered at Jesus, dumbfounded at the absence of a response. A query designed to entrap Jesus—if only he would answer—flittered and then took root into his consciousness. So, circling Jesus for the effect on others in the room, the high priest asked, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

Hours later, the high priest would recognize that Jesus’ retort was everything that he was craving. At the time, however, the reply ignited in him a pious fervor against the audacity of Jesus. Not only did Jesus claim sonship to God, but also to be the fulfillment of the prophet Daniel’s description of the anticipated Messiah: “you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” In a frenzy of motions, the high priest wrestled with and finally ripped two or three gaping holes in his outer robes. Twisting toward his audience, face bloated with vexation, the priest raged as spittle jetted from his mouth. “Blasphemy! No need for another witness, is there?” And even those who had first hesitated granted that Jesus had exceeded the boundaries of the sacred.

As Jesus was being brutalized and handed over to officers within, Peter was below in the courtyard. Easing with the comfort of a warm fire and huddled men, he was unaware of a feminine figure angling from behind until she pointed at him and accused, “You also were with Jesus the Nazarene.” Fear, like fire-works in his belly, finally shocked his lips into a denial, saying, “I neither know nor understand what you are talking about.” He shied back from the gathering and was straying toward a porch, which appeared to be more sheltered and safer than the open court, when a rooster began to crow.

But the same figure followed with a tenacity that horrified Peter. “This is one of them!” she said, this time her voice was carried by the frigid air. Though Peter denied it a second time, the allegation caused more bystanders to gawk at him and say, “Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean too.” With crude oaths, Peter bellowed, “I do not know this man you are talking about!” Simultaneously, a rooster, disturbed from sleep by the glint of a newborn sun, crowed, and Peter remembered. He threw himself down on dirt mixed with jagged stones to weep as Jesus’ former words showered down on him—“Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.”

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Sandwiched between the two sections of Peter's denial story is a narrative describing Jesus' court case before the religious leaders: Peter's story—Jesus' story—Peter's story. Mark, in Mark 14:53-72, uses this sandwich technique for two reasons. The first is to produce a story with two acts, as in double-tiered play, taking place at the same time. This creates a very realistic storyline. The second motive is to compare and/or contrast two groups or characters. On the one hand, Peter is likened to the false witnesses who testify against Jesus, for both sets of testimonials are detrimental to Jesus. On the other hand, the difference between Jesus and Peter is highlighted: Jesus tells the truth about Himself despite the consequences; whereas, Peter lies due to the fear of the consequences. As a result, the reader reacts more strongly to Peter's betrayal, a reaction Mark wanted to produce in the original reader who also faced martyrdom in the first century of Christianity, and in those of us today who face ridicule for the name of Christ.