Jesus Before Pilate

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The Trial That Divided Heaven and Rome

SOLOMON KPOU

Life Reclaimed Publishing
Perth, Western Australia

Jesus Before Pilate: The Trial That Divided Heaven and Rome

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To everyone who has ever stood for truth when it would have been easier to sit down: to the one who lost a friendship, a position or a reputation because they would not call wrong right.

And to every person who, like Pilate's wife, has spoken a warning in love and watched it go unheeded. Your words were not wasted. Heaven heard them, and so did the Man who stood silent before Pilate.

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Preface

> For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.
>
> John 18:37

Every Sunday, Christians around the world say the name of a Roman governor. In the Apostles' Creed we confess that Jesus Christ "suffered under Pontius Pilate". That small fact is where this book began.

The trial before Pilate is more than a courtroom drama. It is a mirror. In it we meet a nervous politician, determined religious leaders, a stirred-up crowd and frightened disciples. We also meet a woman most readers hurry past: Pilate's wife, who warned him, "Have nothing to do with that just Man" (Matthew 27:19). Her warning came at the right moment, and it was ignored. And in the middle of it all stands Jesus, bearing witness to the truth.

In ministry and in my work with young people I have watched people stand where Pilate stood, knowing what was right and feeling the pull of the crowd the other way. I have also seen people find the courage to stand. This book is written for both.

Where I draw on later tradition or imagine a scene, I will say so. Most chapters include short *Case Notes* on the law and history behind the trial, and each ends with questions, a practical step and a prayer.

Pilate asked his question and walked away before he heard the answer. My prayer is that you will stay long enough to hear it.

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INTRODUCTION

The Courtroom Where the Judge Stood in the Dock

Pilate said to them, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said to him, "Let Him be crucified!"

Matthew 27:22

Two Memorials to One Governor

In June 1961 a team of Italian archaeologists was working through the ruins of the ancient theatre at Caesarea Maritima, the Roman capital of Judea on the Mediterranean coast. Behind the stage area, set into a staircase that had been rebuilt in the fourth century, they found a block of limestone that had once been part of something grander. Someone had trimmed it to fit the steps. On its face, worn but readable, were the remains of four lines of Latin.

Most of the letters had been chipped away, but enough survived to make the archaeologists stop. One line ended in the letters *-TIVS PILATVS*. The line below it read *-ECTVS IVDA-*. Scholars soon agreed on the reconstruction. The stone had come from a building, probably a shrine connected with the emperor Tiberius, and it recorded that the building had been dedicated by "Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea".

It was the first inscription ever found that named the man. Until then he had been known from the Gospels and from a handful of ancient writers. Now here was his name, carved at his own direction, on a building he wanted people to remember. The original is in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem today, and a replica stands at Caesarea where the stone was found.

Think about what that stone was meant to do. A Roman governor did not dedicate buildings to the emperor out of piety alone. He did it to be seen. The inscription announced his loyalty to Tiberius and his place in the order of things. It said, in effect: *Pilate was here, and Pilate was Caesar's man.*

Now think about the other memorial.

Every Sunday, in churches across the world, in hundreds of languages, Christians stand and say the words of the Apostles' Creed. In that short confession of faith they name only three human beings. One is Jesus Christ. One is Mary, His mother. The third is a Roman official: Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate".

Pilate never imagined this second memorial. He did not commission it, and he would not have wanted it. Yet it has outlasted his stone by every measure. The stone was broken up and used as a step. The creed, in its present form and in the older baptismal confessions behind it, has been spoken, sung and taught for well over a thousand years, and the name of Pilate has gone with it into every nation where the gospel has gone.

So here is a governor with two memorials. One records the honour he wanted. The other records the decision he made on a single morning in Jerusalem, when a bound prisoner stood in front of him and he could not decide what to do with Him.

This book is about that morning. It is about the man who sat on the judgement seat and the Man who stood before it. And it is about a strange reversal that happens to anyone who reads the story slowly. The longer you look at the trial of Jesus, the less sure you become about who was really on trial.

Why the Trial of Jesus Still Matters

Some events belong to the past and stay there. The trial of Jesus is not one of them. Two thousand years later it still pulls readers into that courtyard and puts a question into their hands.

Part of the reason is simply who stood in the dock. Christians confess that the prisoner before Pilate was not just a good man wrongly accused. He was the eternal Son of God who had taken on our humanity. If that is true, then this was no ordinary miscarriage of justice. This was human authority sitting in judgement over its own Creator. It is no wonder that all four Gospel writers

slow down when they reach this part of the story. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each tell it in their own way, and each gives it far more space than the few hours it took.

Another reason is that the trial exposes us. Every person in the story behaves in ways we recognise. The chief priests protected their position. The crowd let itself be stirred up. The soldiers turned cruelty into entertainment. The disciples ran. Peter, who had promised to die with Jesus, swore that he did not know Him. And Pilate could see perfectly well that Jesus was innocent. He said so more than once. Yet he tried every way he could think of to avoid making a decision, and in the end he made the wrong one.

We would like to think we would have done better. But if we are honest, we are not so sure.

There is a third reason, and it is the most important. The trial of Jesus matters because God was at work in it. The apostles did not look back on that morning as a tragic accident. A few weeks later Peter stood up in Jerusalem and told the crowds that Jesus had been "delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). In the same breath he held his listeners responsible for what had been done. Both things were true. The injustice was real, and the people who carried it out were accountable for it. But through that injustice God was carrying out His plan to save the world. The Innocent was condemned so that the guilty could go free.

That is why the trial still matters. It shows us what we are like, and it shows us what God is like. Bad news and good news, in the same courtyard.

There is a fourth reason that matters to me personally, and I suspect it will matter to some of you. The trial of Jesus is a trial. It has a judge, an accused, accusers, witnesses, charges, a sentence and an execution. Those of us who have spent time around courts, police stations, youth justice and the people caught up in them read it with particular eyes. We notice how the charges shift. We notice how quickly a crowd forms an opinion. We notice an official weighing the cost to his career. We notice a prisoner who refuses to defend himself. The Gospel writers were not writing a law report, but they tell the story with such care that the legal details are there to be seen. Throughout this book I will stop now and then, in short sections called *Case Notes*, to look at those details more closely.

That is part of my own story with this book. For nine years I have worked with children and young people with complex needs, many of them carrying trauma they did not choose, and some of them caught up in the youth justice system. Alongside that work I am a pastor. Those two callings meet in Pilate's courtyard. As a pastor, I see the Saviour who stood in the dock for sinners. As a youth worker, I see a frightened official deciding the fate of someone with no one to speak for Him, in a process that bent under pressure until it produced the result the powerful wanted. I cannot read the trial of Jesus as a story about other people.

The Five Trials, and Why Pilate's Is the One We Remember

We usually speak of "the trial of Jesus" as if it were one event. In fact it was a series of hearings over a single night and the following morning. When we lay the four Gospels side by side, we can see the order.

First, Jesus was taken to Annas, a former high priest who still held enormous influence and whose son-in-law Caiaphas was high priest that year (John 18:13, 19–24). Second, He was brought before Caiaphas and the council. Matthew and Mark describe a hearing during the night (Matthew 26:57–68; Mark 14:53–65), and Luke describes the council meeting as day was breaking (Luke 22:66–71). Third, the council led Him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Fourth, when Pilate learned that Jesus was a Galilean, he sent Him to Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee and happened to be in Jerusalem for the feast (Luke 23:6–12). Fifth, Herod sent Him back to Pilate, and the final sentence was given.

In this book I speak of five trials, treating the night hearing and the daybreak meeting of the council as one Jewish trial in two stages. Many writers count six, separating those two meetings, and that is a reasonable reading too. The number matters less than what the sequence shows. Jesus was passed from one authority to another, religious and political, Jewish and Roman, and not one of them would do what was right. Appendix A sets the five hearings out in a chart.

You may have heard these hearings described as "illegal". The rules usually cited come from the Mishnah, a collection of Jewish legal tradition written down around AD 200 (see especially Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 4.1). Scholars still

debate how many of those rules were in force in Jesus' day, so it is safer to call the proceedings irregular. Even so, the Gospels make it plain that false witnesses were sought, that their testimony did not agree and that the outcome had been decided before the hearing began (Mark 14:55–59).

So why is Pilate's trial the one we remember?

Partly because it was the decisive one. The council could condemn Jesus in their own eyes, but they could not lawfully put Him to death. "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death," they told Pilate (John 18:31). Under Roman rule the power of capital punishment in Judea belonged to the governor (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.117). Whatever the chief priests wanted, nothing would happen to Jesus unless Pilate agreed to it.

Partly because the Gospel writers record it in such detail. We hear Pilate's questions. We hear Jesus' answers, and His silences. We watch Pilate go in and out of the Praetorium, trying one plan after another, and we can count the doors he tried before he walked through the last one.

And partly because the church itself has never let us forget. Paul reminded Timothy that Christ Jesus "witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate" (1 Timothy 6:13). Early in the second century, Ignatius of Antioch was already anchoring the gospel to Pilate's governorship in his letters (Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 11). When the creeds took shape, Pilate's name was there. Every time believers say that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate", they are saying that the gospel happened in real history, in a real province, under a real governor whose name you can read on a stone. Pilate tried to wash his hands of Jesus. History has never let him.

A Governor, a Rabbi and the Question That Still Hangs in the Air

The two men who faced each other that morning could hardly have been more different.

Pontius Pilate was a Roman of the equestrian class, the order just below the senators. He governed Judea from about AD 26 to 36. Besides the Gospels, the Jewish writers Josephus and Philo describe him (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.55–64, 85–89; Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* 299–305), and neither of

them liked him. Their accounts portray a man who could be harsh and provocative and who never forgot that the emperor might be watching.

Jesus of Nazareth was a teacher from an unremarkable town in Galilee. His followers called Him Rabbi. For about three years He had travelled through the towns and villages of Israel, teaching, healing the sick and announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand. He had drawn crowds and made enemies. By the time He was brought to Pilate, He had been awake all night. He had been struck, mocked and abandoned by those closest to Him.

One man had all the power. The other had all the truth.

At one point in their conversation, Jesus told Pilate why He had come into the world: "For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (John 18:37). Pilate replied with three words that people have repeated ever since: "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Then, without waiting for an answer, he went out to the crowd.

We do not know how Pilate said it. Perhaps it was a sneer. Perhaps it was weariness. Perhaps, somewhere underneath, it was a real question. Writers have argued about his tone for centuries. But whatever was in Pilate's heart, the tragedy is the same. He asked the most important question a person can ask. He was standing in front of the only Person who could answer it. And he walked out of the room.

That question still hangs in the air. We live in a world that is deeply unsure about truth, and in a sense our whole culture is standing in Pilate's hall, asking his question and heading for the door. This book is an invitation to stop at the doorway and stay for the answer.

How This Book Is Built, and Why a Wife's Warning Is the Key

The book follows the shape of a trial.

Part One, "The Case Is Brought", follows Jesus from Gethsemane through the night hearings to the governor's door. We will see how a religious verdict reached in the dark was reshaped into a political charge, and we will meet Pilate himself, the historical man behind the name.

Part Two, "The Hearing", is the heart of the book. Seven chapters take us through the trial before Pilate one exchange at a time: the question about king-

ship, the silence of Jesus before Pilate and Herod, the question about truth, the warning from Pilate's wife, the crowd's choice of Barabbas, the scourging and "Behold the Man!", and the moment Pilate became afraid.

Part Three, "The Sentence", follows the decision to its end: the threat that broke Pilate's resistance, the basin of water, the title Pilate nailed above the cross, and the seal he authorised on the tomb, which could not hold what God had determined to raise.

Part Four, "The Verdict That Still Stands", asks what became of Pilate and then turns the courtroom around. The Man Pilate judged is the One who will judge us all, and the One who took the place of the guilty.

Along the way, one figure keeps coming back, though she speaks only one sentence.

While Pilate was sitting on the judgement seat, Matthew tells us, his wife sent him a message: "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him" (Matthew 27:19). The Bible never tells us her name. Later tradition calls her Procla or Procula, a name first found in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, also known as the *Acts of Pilate*. Some churches honour her as a saint. But Scripture gives us only that one sentence, and it is enough.

Why do I call her warning the key?

Because it shows that Pilate was not left in the dark. His own eyes told him that Jesus was innocent. His own conscience pushed him to try again and again to release Him. And at the critical moment he received a warning from the person who knew him best. It came while he was still on the judgement seat, while the decision was still his to make. Pilate did not condemn Jesus because he lacked information. He condemned Him because listening would have cost him too much.

Her warning also turns the story towards us. We are unlikely ever to sentence a man to crucifixion. But all of us, at one time or another, face a choice between what we know is right and what is safe, popular or convenient. In His kindness God often places a voice beside us at those moments. It may be a friend, a parent, a passage of Scripture or the quiet pressure of the Holy Spirit on our conscience. Some of us need to learn to listen to that voice. Some of us need the courage to be that voice, even if no one listens.

A word about how I handle the sources. The Gospels give a remarkably detailed account of the trial, but they do not answer every question we would like to ask. Where I draw on history, I will tell you where it comes from. Where tradition has added something, I will say so. Where scholars disagree, I will tell you that too. And where I imagine a scene to help you see it, I will mark it clearly as imagined. The truth of the gospel does not need us to add to it.

Each chapter ends in the same way. *Examine the Evidence* offers questions for personal reflection or group discussion. *Your Verdict* suggests one concrete step. A short prayer closes the chapter. Please do not rush past them. That is where the story stops being about Pilate and starts being about you.

Pilate's question to the crowd was, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" (Matthew 27:22). The crowd answered it that morning. Pilate answered it too, with a basin of water and a sentence of death. But the question did not stay in Jerusalem. It has travelled down the centuries to every person who has ever heard the name of Jesus. And now it has come to you.

The courtroom is open. The prisoner is standing before you. A warning has been given.

What will you do with Jesus?

PART ONE

The Case Is Brought

CHAPTER 1

The Night Before the Trial

When I was with you daily in the temple, you did not try to seize Me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.
Luke 22:53

Before Jesus ever stood in front of Pontius Pilate, He walked through a long night. It began in an upper room with bread and wine. It moved out across the Kidron Valley into an olive grove. It ended, many hours later, with a bound prisoner being marched through the grey streets of Jerusalem towards the residence of the Roman governor.

If we want to understand the trial before Pilate, we have to begin here. The Praetorium did not come out of nowhere. By the time Jesus reached it, He had been betrayed by a friend and abandoned by His followers. He had been questioned by the most powerful priestly family in the land. He had been struck in the face, spat on and blindfolded, and denied three times by the man who had promised to die with Him. He had not slept. And He had not stopped trusting His Father.

It is a hard night to read about. But it has something to say to anyone who has ever lain awake wondering whether morning will ever come.

A Garden, a Kiss and a Scattering

Gethsemane was a familiar place. Luke tells us Jesus went there "as He was accustomed" (Luke 22:39), and John says Judas knew the spot because Jesus often met there with His disciples (John 18:2). The name probably means "oil press". It is hard to think of a better name for the place where the Son of God was pressed down under the weight of what was coming.

I have written elsewhere at length about what happened among those olive trees, so here I want to notice only what we need for the trial that followed. Jesus prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39). His human soul drew back from the cup of suffering and judgement that lay ahead, and Luke describes an anguish so intense that His sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22:44). Yet the prayer ends in surrender. Whatever would happen in the courts of Jerusalem the next morning, the decisive struggle had already taken place in a garden at night, between the Son and the Father.

That matters for everything that follows. When we watch Jesus before Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod, we are not watching a man thrown off balance by events. We are watching a man who has already said yes.

Notice too where that yes was won. Jesus did not go to Gethsemane for the first time on the night of His arrest. He went "as He was accustomed". The steadiness He showed before His judges was built in a place of prayer He had returned to again and again. Habit does not replace faith, but it makes room for it.

I have tried to teach this to the young people of Waymakers Church in Perth. Over the years I have encouraged many of them to stay consistent in their prayer life: not only when they feel like praying, and not only when something has gone wrong. Not all of them took it up. But some did, and today some of those same young people stand up and pray in our church services. When I hear them, I am reminded that the prayers we pray in public grow out of the prayers we keep praying when no one is watching.

Then the torches appeared between the trees.

Judas came with a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent by the chief priests and elders. John adds that a detachment of soldiers and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees came as well (John 18:3). Judas had arranged a signal: "Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him" (Matthew 26:48). A kiss was the ordinary greeting of a disciple to his teacher. Judas turned the sign of affection into the sign of betrayal. Jesus' reply is so gentle it is almost hard to bear: "Friend, why have you come?" (Matthew 26:50). Luke records another question: "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48).

Peter, impulsive as ever, drew a sword and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear. John gives us the servant's name, Malchus (John 18:10). Jesus stopped Peter at once. "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). Luke alone tells us that Jesus touched the man's ear and healed him (Luke 22:51). The last healing the Gospels record before the cross was for a member of the arresting party.

Then the disciples ran.

"Then they all forsook Him and fled" (Mark 14:50).

Mark adds a strange detail about a young man wearing only a linen cloth, who left the cloth in the hands of those who seized him and fled naked (Mark 14:51–52). Some have wondered whether this was Mark himself. He does not say, and we should not pretend to know. What the detail does tell us is how complete the scattering was. Everyone who had sworn loyalty disappeared into the dark, some of them leaving even their clothes behind. Jesus was led away alone.

Remember that picture when we come to Pilate's courtyard. There will be accusers there, and soldiers, and a crowd. There will be no friends.

"I Am He": The Prisoner Who Gave Himself Up

John tells the arrest from a different angle, and his account changes how we see the rest of the story.

In John's Gospel Jesus does not wait to be found. Knowing everything that was about to happen to Him, He went out to meet the arresting party and asked, "Whom are you seeking?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." He said, "I am He." And John records an extraordinary detail: "Now when He said to them, 'I am He,' they drew back and fell to the ground" (John 18:6).

Whatever exactly happened in that moment, John wants us to see something about who held the power in that garden. The words translated "I am He" are, in Greek, simply "I am". Readers of John's Gospel have heard those words before on Jesus' lips: "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). They echo the name God gave Himself at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Soldiers and temple police came with torches and weapons to arrest a wanted man, and at the sound of His answer they fell backwards. Then He let them take Him.

Even then His first concern was for His friends. "I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way" (John 18:8). The shepherd steps between the wolves and the sheep.

Matthew records something similar. When Peter swung his sword, Jesus said, "Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?" (Matthew 26:53–54). A Roman legion at full strength numbered several thousand men. Jesus is saying, in effect, that if He wanted a defence force, heaven had one ready. He did not call for it.

This is the key to reading the whole trial. Earlier in John's Gospel Jesus had said of His life, "No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John 10:18). On the night of His arrest, that claim was tested, and it held.

So when we watch the priests, the governor and the soldiers in the chapters ahead, we need to keep two things in view at once. On one level, they were doing exactly what they wanted to do with Jesus, and they are responsible for it. On another level, nothing was being taken from Him that He was not freely giving. Pilate would later say to Him, "Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" (John 19:10). Jesus already knew the answer. Pilate did not.

There is great comfort here for anyone who feels that their life is being decided by other people. The Jesus who walks into Pilate's courtroom is not a victim of circumstances. He is the Lord of them. And He is the same Lord who walks with His people through their own courtrooms, hospital corridors and long nights.

Before Annas: The Power Behind the Priesthood

John alone tells us where they took Him first.

"And they led Him away to Annas first, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year" (John 18:13).

Annas had been high priest years earlier. Josephus tells us he was appointed by the Roman governor Quirinius around AD 6 and removed by another governor, Valerius Gratus, about a decade later (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.26,

34). But losing the office did not mean losing the power. Josephus also records that five of Annas's sons became high priest after him, which he regarded as a remarkable mark of family good fortune (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.198). His son-in-law Caiaphas held the office that year. In the eyes of many, Annas was still the real head of the priestly establishment, and Luke can speak of "Annas and Caiaphas being high priests" in the same breath (Luke 3:2).

It seems that Jesus was brought to Annas for an informal, preliminary questioning while the wider council was being gathered. Annas asked Him about His disciples and His teaching. Jesus' answer was calm and direct:

"I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said" (John 18:20–21).

In other words, if you have a case, bring your witnesses. A fair hearing begins with evidence, not with an attempt to make the accused incriminate himself.

One of the officers standing by struck Him with the palm of his hand. "Do You answer the high priest like that?" Jesus replied, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?" (John 18:22–23).

It is the first recorded blow of the night. It will not be the last. And notice that Jesus does not strike back, but neither does He pretend that the blow was just. He names it. There is a difference between turning the other cheek and calling wrong right. Jesus did the first and never the second.

Case Notes: A Hearing in the Dark

Anyone who has worked around the justice system will notice several things about the night hearings that do not sit well.

The hearings were held at night, in private houses, rather than in daylight in the council's usual meeting place. The accused had no advocate. The questioning was aimed at getting the prisoner to condemn himself. Witnesses were sought, Mark says, "to put Him to death" (Mark 14:55), which means the outcome was decided before the evidence was heard. And the prisoner was struck while under questioning.

Many books list a set of rules from the Mishnah that these hearings broke, such as the rule that capital cases must be tried in the daytime and that a verdict of guilt could

not be given on the same day as the trial (Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 4.1). We need to be careful here. The Mishnah was written down around AD 200, and we do not know how many of its rules were in force, or observed, in a council led by the priestly aristocracy a century and a half earlier. "Irregular" is the honest word, not "illegal".

But we do not need a later law code to see the problem. The law of Moses itself required that a matter be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15), and it warned that a false witness should receive the penalty he had intended for the accused (Deuteronomy 19:16–19). Any court that begins with a verdict and goes looking for evidence has already stopped doing justice.

Before Caiaphas: False Witnesses and a True Confession

From Annas, Jesus was sent bound to Caiaphas, where the chief priests, elders and scribes had assembled (John 18:24; Mark 14:53). Matthew and Mark describe a hearing in which the council looked for testimony that would justify a death sentence and could not find any that agreed.

"Now the chief priests and all the council sought testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree" (Mark 14:55–56).

Some claimed He had threatened to destroy the temple, yet even on that point their testimony did not agree (Mark 14:57–59). We will look more closely at the charges in the next chapter. For now, notice what Jesus did while the witnesses contradicted one another. He said nothing. He did not need to. The case was falling apart on its own.

Then the high priest changed tactics. He stood up in the middle of the room and put the question directly. Matthew tells us he placed Jesus under oath: "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" (Matthew 26:63).

This time Jesus answered. Mark records it most plainly:

"I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62).

His words drew on two passages every person in that room knew well. Psalm 110 speaks of one whom the LORD invites to sit at His right hand. Daniel 7 describes "One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven", who receives an everlasting dominion from the Ancient of Days (Daniel

7:13–14). Jesus was not merely accepting the title Messiah. He was claiming to share the throne of God and to be the One who would one day judge the very men who were judging Him.

Caiaphas tore his clothes. There was no further need of witnesses, he declared; they had heard the blasphemy themselves. "What do you think?" he asked, and they all condemned Him as deserving of death (Mark 14:63–64). Then some began to spit on Him. They blindfolded Him, struck Him and taunted Him to prophesy who had hit Him. The officers joined in and struck Him with the palms of their hands (Mark 14:65).

There is a bitter irony in that taunt. "Prophesy!" they said. At that very moment, out in the courtyard, one of His prophecies was being fulfilled word for word.

Archaeology has given us an intriguing footnote to this scene. In 1990 construction workers in Jerusalem's Peace Forest, south of the Old City, broke into a burial cave containing a number of ossuaries, the stone boxes in which bones were gathered for burial. One elaborately decorated ossuary bore the name "Joseph son of Caiaphas". Josephus tells us the high priest's full name was Joseph Caiaphas (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.35). Many scholars believe the ossuary belonged to the high priest's family and perhaps held his own bones, though others question the identification because of the spelling and the absence of any priestly title. It is now in the Israel Museum. If the identification is right, it is a sobering thought. The man who tore his robes at Jesus' answer has left us a box of bones. The Man he condemned left an empty tomb.

Peter by the Fire

While Jesus was being questioned inside, Peter was outside in the courtyard.

We should give Peter some credit. The other disciples had scattered. Peter followed at a distance, along with another disciple who was known to the high priest, and that disciple spoke to the doorkeeper and brought him inside (John 18:15–16). It was cold. The servants and officers had made a fire of coals, and Peter stood with them, warming himself (John 18:18). He wanted to be close to Jesus. He just did not want to be identified with Him.

A servant girl looked at him in the firelight and said he had been with Jesus of Nazareth. Peter denied it. A little later someone else recognised him, and he

denied it again, this time with an oath. About an hour later the bystanders pressed him. Surely he was one of them, for his Galilean accent gave him away. Then Peter "began to curse and swear, saying, 'I do not know the Man!'" (Matthew 26:74).

Immediately a rooster crowed.

Then Luke gives us one of the most piercing sentences in the Bible:

"And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.' So Peter went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:61–62).

Luke does not tell us what was in that look. But everything we know about Jesus suggests that it was not the look of a man saying, "I told you so." Only hours earlier He had told Peter that Satan wanted to sift him like wheat, but that He had prayed for him so that his faith would not fail, and that once he had turned back he was to strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:31–32). Jesus knew about the denial before it happened. He had already prayed for Peter's restoration before Peter fell.

Sit with that for a moment. Peter's failure did not surprise Jesus, and it did not cancel His plans for Peter. The same man who warmed his hands at a fire of coals and denied his Lord would one day stand by another fire of coals on a beach in Galilee and be asked three times, "Do you love Me?" (John 21:9, 15–17). But that was still in the future. On this night all Peter had was the crowing of a rooster, the memory of a look and tears he could not stop.

Church history gives us a man who walked a similar road. Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII and Edward VI, was imprisoned when the Catholic Mary I came to the throne. Under long pressure, and in fear of the fire, he signed a series of recantations renouncing the Protestant faith he had championed. Yet on the day of his execution in Oxford, 21 March 1556, he was brought to St Mary's Church to read a final public recantation, and instead he withdrew everything he had signed. According to the account in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, when the flames were lit he stretched out his right hand, the hand that had signed the recantations, and held it in the fire first. Cranmer had failed under pressure. He did not let the failure be the last word.

We do not have to admire every part of Cranmer's life to feel the force of that moment. Peter and Cranmer both learned that the courage they boasted of was not enough. Both learned, too, that failure need not be final.

Bound and Led at Daybreak

Eventually the long night began to give way. Luke tells us that as soon as it was day, the council of the elders, chief priests and scribes came together and led Jesus into their council, asking Him again whether He was the Christ (Luke 22:66–71). Matthew and Mark describe the same morning decision:

"When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death. And when they had bound Him, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate the governor" (Matthew 27:1–2).

Why the morning meeting, when a verdict had already been reached in the night? Perhaps it was to give the decision a more formal standing. Perhaps it was to agree on how the case would be presented to the Roman governor, since a charge of blasphemy would mean little to him. Whatever the reason, the matter was now moving out of the high priest's house and into the political world of Rome.

Matthew pauses here to tell us what happened to the man who had started it all. When Judas saw that Jesus had been condemned, he was "remorseful". He brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders and said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." Their reply is chilling: "What is that to us? You see to it!" (Matthew 27:3–4). Judas threw the money down in the temple, went away and hanged himself (Matthew 27:5).

Set the two failures of that night side by side. Peter denied Jesus. Judas betrayed Him. Both were sorry. But Peter's sorrow brought him back to Jesus, and Judas's sorrow drove him away. Paul would later put it in a sentence: "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). The difference between the two men was not the size of their sin. It was where they took it.

Notice, too, the words of the chief priests to Judas: "You see to it!" We will hear almost the same words again before the morning is over, on the lips of Pil-

ate as he washes his hands (Matthew 27:24). Everyone that day was trying to hand responsibility to someone else.

So they bound Jesus again and led Him through the city. John adds a detail heavy with irony:

"Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover" (John 18:28).

They were careful not to become ceremonially unclean by entering a Gentile building, while at the same time handing over an innocent man to be killed. That is not only an ancient failing. People in every age have managed to keep the small rules while breaking the great ones. Before we shake our heads at them, we should ask where we do the same.

And so Jesus arrived at the Praetorium. He had been betrayed, abandoned, denied, struck and condemned. Now He would stand before Rome. Behind Him, the men who had condemned Him in the night were already shaping a new charge for Roman ears.

The Young Man Who Went Home

Peter was not the only follower of Jesus who failed under pressure and found his way back. The New Testament tells the story of John Mark.

Mark set out with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but partway through he left them and went home to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Scripture does not tell us why. Whatever the reason, Paul saw it as desertion. When Barnabas later wanted to take Mark on the second journey, "Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work" (Acts 15:38). The disagreement was so sharp that Paul and Barnabas parted company.

That could have been the end of Mark's story. It was not. Barnabas gave him a second chance. Years later, writing from prison near the end of his life, Paul asked Timothy, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). The man Paul once refused to trust had become someone he wanted beside him at the end.

Early Christian tradition links this same Mark with Peter and credits him with writing the Gospel of Mark. Some readers have even wondered whether he

was the young man who ran away naked from Gethsemane (Mark 14:51–52), though that is only a guess. If the tradition about his Gospel is right, then two men who failed that week, Peter and Mark, together gave the church one of its four accounts of the trial. Failure was not the last word for either of them.

Examine the Evidence

1. Jesus prayed, "Not as I will, but as You will." What would it look like for you to pray that honestly about something you are facing right now?
2. John shows Jesus stepping forward and giving Himself up. How does it change your reading of the trial to know that nothing was taken from Him that He did not freely give?
3. Peter wanted to be near Jesus without being identified with Him. Where are you tempted to warm your hands at the world's fire and keep quiet about your faith?
4. Peter and Judas both failed and both were sorry. What made the difference between them? Where do you take your failures?
5. The chief priests told Judas, "You see to it!" When have you pushed responsibility onto someone else?

Your Verdict

Think of one failure of nerve that still troubles you. This week, do what Peter did and Judas did not: take it to Jesus rather than away from Him. Name it to Him in prayer, and if it is wise and safe, speak to a trusted believer about it.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You walked through the darkest night anyone has ever known. You prayed with tears in Gethsemane, You were betrayed with a kiss and abandoned by Your friends, and You stood silent before those who had already decided against You. Thank You that You did it willingly, for me. When my own nights seem to go on and on, help me to pray as You prayed and to trust the Father as You trusted Him. Where I have denied You, look on me as You looked on Peter, and bring me back. Teach me to believe that morning is coming. In Your name I pray, Amen.