

10/16/16

“When the Rock Crumbles: The Anatomy of Apostasy”

Mark 14:53-15:5

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Peter denied Jesus. Jesus denied himself.

Peter was ashamed of Jesus because he misunderstood glory. Jesus died a shameful death to bring Peter to glory.

Peter was unfaithful and succumbed to temptation. Jesus ran the gauntlet of the greatest series of temptations in human history, but remained faithful.

Peter succumbs to the riffraff and rabble of the commoners in the courtyard (including the maid of the High Priest – an obvious foil over and against the servant of the High Priest Peter boldly but impetuously attacked in Gethsemane). Jesus stands firm before the most powerful council in Israel (and will do so again before Caesar’s representative, Pilate).

Peter lied through his teeth and under oath. Jesus made the good confession before men.

As I pointed out in the sermon, Peter’s fatal flaw can be considered from two perspectives. From one perspective, it was Peter’s unwillingness to suffer with Jesus that doomed him to deny Christ. He would not pay the cost of discipleship; he would not die with Jesus as he said he would; he clung to his life rather than losing it for Jesus’ sake; he would not take up his cross; he would not have fellowship in the pains of Jesus. Bonhoeffer said that when Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die. In a word, Peter refused to die. And thus his identity as a disciple died. He would not die with Jesus so, spiritually speaking, he died that night. Only the grace of Jesus can resurrect him as a faithful disciple.

From another perspective, Peter fell away because of pride. He had boasted in what he would and could do. He did not see his need to pray for the Spirit and for strength in Gethsemane. He was obviously far too cocky, too sure of himself, too confident in his understanding of what Jesus was going to do and what he was going to do alongside Jesus (as seen, e.g., in chopping off the ear of the High Priest’s servant – a revolutionary act and rebellious act that shows you how far away Peter was from understanding Jesus’ kingdom program). Of course, this dovetails with his unwillingness to suffer. He would not enter into shame and suffering with Jesus and for Jesus’ sake *precisely because* he pridefully believed he should be above such things. He believed his association with Jesus, the prophet and miracle worker

would exempt him from suffering; instead it meant he would be called into the greatest suffering imaginable.

My hunch is that after Jesus did not join Peter in an armed attack on those who came to arrest him, Peter began to realize that Jesus was not going to conform to his expectations for messiahship. Perhaps he began to recalculate things and reconsider whether or not he had rightly understood Jesus' predictions. Maybe he started to doubt Jesus. But because Jesus was, quite obviously, going to suffer, Peter began to distance himself from Jesus – lest he fall into suffering himself. My hunch is that Peter is not just denying that he knew Jesus – but he is actually denying that Jesus is Messiah, despite his earlier confession (Mk. 8). If he was Messiah, he would have stood up to those who came to arrest him and would have begun his revolution. Peter was ready for battle, if it came to that. He was willing to die on the battlefield – in glory – though no doubt he expected to survive the revolution and take his seat at Jesus' right hand. But when things took an unexpected turn – one Jesus had prepared him for, but which he could not accept – he bailed on Jesus to save his own neck.

Some commend Peter for trailing Jesus into the High Priest's precincts. The other disciples scattered and went to who knows where. At least Peter hung around in Jesus' vicinity a little longer. Perhaps Peter was a little bolder than the others at first. Maybe he was curious and had to see what would happen to Jesus. We really don't know. But nothing in the narrative itself commends him in any way. Peter failed in every way. The Rock turned to mush.

A really enjoyable reading of the trial account in Mark is found in Jerry Camery-Hoggatt's *Irony in Mark's Gospel* (my own such study is available here: <http://trinity-pres.net/essays/ironic-gospel.pdf>). Camery-Hoggatt's book does a good job with irony in the whole of the gospel, but the trial scene is the classic case study in Markan ironies. Indeed, the student of the gospel who misses irony, e.g., when the Jesus is mocked as a false prophet at the very moment his prophecies are coming to pass, is going to be greatly impoverished in his reading. Jesus does not comply with their wish that he prophesy because he has already done so! Likewise, when Pilate's soldiers mock him as a false king, they are stating precisely the truth – and are even unwittingly aiding in his coronation! The irony doubles back on them, as they unwittingly speak the truth when they intend mockery.

Of course, as I pointed out, Peter's very name is filled with irony in the whole scene. The one who has been named "Rock" crumbles and falls to pieces as soon times get hard. He is anything but a rock! Peter ends up denying his own identity as a disciple. He contradicts the meaning of his name by being so soft and weak.

Robert Fowler's intriguing reader-response commentary on Mark points out that there is hardly a single word spoken by any character in the passion narrative that

can be taken in a straightforward way. Even though explicit signals of irony may be lacking, any careful reader is going to notice the narrative misdirection and the layers of meaning built into the words of just about every speaker. There is something deeply serious but also very playful about Mark's gospel. Fowler points out how Mark deliberately leaves certain ambiguities that the other gospels clear up for the reader, but that in doing so, Mark's gospel takes on the unique power to create a community of those who "get it" (e.g., those who get the ironies, misdirected rhetoric, metaphors, riddles, etc., all of which pour meaning into what it means for Jesus to be the Christ and what it means for us to be his disciples).

Following up on the sermon's application: On the Spirit making us "Peters" or "rocks," able to withstand the onslaught of suffering, see also 1 Peter 2:5, which call Christians "living stones" which are being built up in a "Spiritual house" (a house built by and indwelt by the Holy Spirit) to offer "Spiritual sacrifices" (worship offered in and through the Holy Spirit). We are formed by the work of the Spirit into hard stones that can stand up to the pressures of persecution and pain. Of course, rock/stone imagery is all over the place in the NT, for Jesus (the chief cornerstone, which means a new temple will be built on him), the apostles (Eph. 2, Mt. 16, Rev. 21), and Christians (1 Peter 2).

When the High Priest realizes that the witnesses cannot give credible evidence against Jesus, he tries to take matters into his own hands and get Jesus to incriminate himself. Jesus is silent up to the climatic moment; as the High Priest asks his question directly to Jesus, the narrative arc of the gospel comes to one its high points and one its most tense moments. We are filled with suspense: Will Jesus finally answer? Will he unveil his true identity in a public forum for the first time? Jesus makes his confession, giving them all the evidence they need, but confirming for the reader/hearer what we have known from the opening verse of the gospel: Jesus is the Lord incarnate in the flesh, the true Son of God, and the promised messianic king.

The narrative tension before the High Priest is only matched by the tension down below in the courtyard when Peter is asked about his relationship with Jesus. Witnesses make accusations that are true. A question is posed to Peter. How will he respond? Will he tell the truth like Jesus? Will he suffer with Jesus as he said he would? Or will he deny Jesus as Jesus predicted? Peter fails miserably. Whereas Jesus spoke truth and suffered the consequences, Peter lies in order evade the consequences.

Ironically, despite the boasting of the male disciples, women are the only ones who stand firm at the foot of Jesus' cross. They are also the ones who show up at his tomb. Had the disciples believed the words of Jesus, they would have been hanging around outside the tomb, waiting for Jesus to burst out as he had promised. Instead they are still MIA on Easter morning.,

In the sermon I pointed out that the prophecies of Jesus fulfilled within the plotline of Mark's gospel (e.g., Peter's threefold denial) set us up to expect his other prophecies that are *not* fulfilled within the gospel narrative to come to pass as well. A man who has such complete knowledge/control over events as Jesus obviously does is going to keep his word. In the book *Mark as Story*, a helpful literary reading of the gospel, scholars Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie point out that Jesus' fulfilled prophecies within the gospel also "enables Mark's narrator to end the Gospel in a powerful and enigmatic way" (assuming the short ending in chapter 16). Because Jesus' prophecies have been consistently fulfilled, the reader is assured that Jesus' promise about the resurrection is going to be fulfilled as well. The story can end abruptly and without closure because Jesus has already told us how it ends! We have been trained to expect any not-yet-fulfilled prophecies of Jesus to come true, so we know he is risen bodily even though we never actually meet the risen Christ in the narrative itself.

Mark does something very interesting with the fire in Mark 14. Peter is warming himself around the fire with the masses in 14:54. In the sermon I noted that this experience might be why Peter spoke of the coming persecution on the church as a "fiery trial" in 1 Peter 4 – he was recounting his own trial before the fire light, but obviously hoping and expecting a better outcome for the church. 1 Peter 4 is full of resonances with the account of Peter's denials: When Peter was reproached for the name of Christ, he fell away; rather than suffering faithfully as a disciple of Christ, he was ashamed. Peter wants the church to be able to rejoice in their fiery trials, so he wants them to know that their sufferings are a participation in Christ's sufferings. Those who attack them are blaspheming God (cf. Peter's acts of blasphemy), but those who suffer like Christians will glorify God (as Peter should have that night). Thus, 1 Peter 4:12-19 is something of an antidote to Peter-like failures when times of testing come.

But there is something else noteworthy about Mark 14:54. The word used for the fire in this verse is an unusual word. It's the term "phos," which means "light" or "shining." The light is shining into the darkness of the night, and that light is going to expose and reveal who Peter actually is. The light will bring out into the open what has been hidden. The light exposes Peter's sin and weakness as he denies Jesus three times. The light judges Peter (and all the disciples, and indeed all of the old humanity) to be a failure; he isn't what he claimed to be (an invincible super-

disciple, ready to die with Jesus if needed). Indeed, he is the exact opposite of what he claimed to be: a coward who withers like a cut flower when hard times hit.

But there is something else to notice. When Jesus is on trial before the High Priest, the High Priest uses another form of the same word (phos). After Jesus makes his confession, the High Priest says, "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" But the question could also be translated, "Does that enlighten you?" or "How does it appear to you?" or "In what light do you see it?" or "How does it shine to you?" The High Priest uses the verbal form of the noun used in v. 54. Given that the term phos is used in a somewhat odd way in both places, I think we are supposed to explore the connections. As he is on trial, Jesus is being exposed for who he is. The light is shining on him and through him; the light of his divine identity is coming out. The truth that he is messiah and divine is now out in the open. Thus: At the same time Peter's darkness and depravity is coming to light through his fiery trial, the real identity of Jesus is also being brought to light. This is another vital parallel between the two trial scenes.

The High Priest DQ'd himself from his office at the same time Peter DQ'd himself from his apostolic office. Another irony, another connection, another sign of man's failure apart from God's grace.

At the same time the High Priest is cursing Jesus, Peter is cursing himself. But Jesus, who should be blessed rather than cursed, will bear the curse on Peter's behalf. Peter called down curses to save himself; Jesus bore up under curses to save others.

Noticing these sorts of connections has huge theological ramifications. Sometimes people wonder why the gospels do not really seem to have much of an atonement theology (with rare texts like Mk. 10:45 serving as exceptions). How could the gospels record the most important event in history without telling us what it all means? Do we have to go to the Pauline epistles to get an interpretation of the cross? Did the evangelists have a theology of the atonement? Actually, they do, but we have to read between the lines to catch it. There is nothing wrong with reading the gospels through a Pauline lens (we expect inner biblical consistency, after all), but the gospels themselves already provide all the basic categories we need:

- The gospels use priestly language (e.g., "laying hands on"), which shows the cross must be understood as a sacrifice in fulfillment of old covenant Levitical shadows. The fact that the cross is coordinated with Passover reinforces this theme. Jesus is the Passover Lamb, which connects with victory over false gods, exodus from death, new creation, forgiveness, etc. This also means, ironically, that the priests of Israel fulfill their priestly office

in spite of themselves. They have been offering sacrifices over and over; now they are finally going to offer up the final and effective sacrifice.

- The High Priest tears his robes which according to Leviticus 10 unleashes wrath on the people (the priests robes correspond to the veils in the temple, protecting people from God's holy presence and holding back wrath). Of course, that wrath is going to fall on Jesus, so his death is propitiatory. He will step in the way of the wrath as it pours out, protecting and covering his people. Paul teaches this in Rom. 3, but it is already embedded in the gospel narrative. The torn robes also demonstrate disqualification from office (cf. Dt. 21; 1 Sam. 15; etc.), so the trial/cross point to the end of the old covenant era. There must be a new priesthood, as Hebrews demonstrates.
- The language used at the Last Supper not only indicates that a new covenant is being inaugurated to replace the old covenant, but strongly suggests that the Eucharist (and thus the entire Christian liturgy) is replacing the temple, with its liturgy and sacrifices. The language at the Last Supper also points to a new exodus, as N. T. Wright has pointed out. Finally, the language is an echo of Isa. 53, indicating that when Jesus pours out his life, he will bring life to many. (On all of this, see Riki Watts' book on the new exodus in the gospel of Mark.)
- The language of the cup in Gethsemane points to Jesus drinking curse and wrath on our behalf, taking the judgment we deserve (cf. Ezek. 23:32ff, etc.). See my sermon on that text for more.
- When Peter calls down curses on himself, where do those curses land? Obviously on Jesus. Peter commits blasphemy but Jesus dies in his place as a blasphemer. The sin of Peter is exactly what Jesus is charged with. Substitution and curse bearing (in fulfillment of Torah) are clearly implied by the narrative structure. If the very crime Peter is guilty of is the charge that results in Jesus' death, there can be no question that, as Luther said, Jesus dies for and as Peter the denier and blasphemer.
- Barabbas (= "son of the father," and thus representative of every man) is set free and Jesus dies in his place. Again, this is substitution atonement in narrative form. Jesus dies as robber, the very thing Barabbas was actually guilty of.
- Simon the Cyrene carries Jesus' cross. As Stott has pointed out, every Christian is both a Barabbas (set free because Jesus dies in our place, the innocent in the place of the guilty), but also a Simon (called to carry our crosses, thus participating in Christ's self-denial and death).
- The disciples are scattered when Jesus is arrested/tried/crucified. But they are reunited in his resurrection. The head is severed from the body, but then body and head are rejoined in new life (cf. the miracle pattern in Mark's gospel). Thus, we need to develop a sociology of the atonement, or an ecclesiology of the atonement, so to speak. The cross not only brings us back to God, it reunites us to one another.
- The cross and resurrection go together; the injustice of the cross (at a human level) is overturned at the resurrection. Thus, the cross and resurrection together reveal the righteousness of God. The cross and resurrection are the

victory of God over sin, evil, and death. *Christus victor* clearly emerges from the narrative.

We could go on, but the point should be clear: There is a very clear atonement theology embedded in the details of the evangelists' narratives. Atonement theology is not just a Pauline thing; it is written right into the narrative of the cross itself. The evangelists actually give us all the categories we need to develop a full blown theology of the cross.

This whole passage would make for an interesting study of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. We know that everything is unfolding according to a divine script; if ever a passage indicated there is an all-encompassing divine decree it is Mark 14. Jesus has prophesied events, and has also suggested that the Hebrew Scriptures are coming to fulfillment in all that comes to pass. But this does not negate human responsibility or produce some kind of fatalism. So, Jesus encourages the disciples to pray precisely so they can stand firm, even though his prophecies require them to scatter (cf. 14:27). After the cockcrow forces Peter to come to grips with what he has done, he does not say, "Well, it was decreed, so I could not have done otherwise." He weeps because he knows even though Jesus had foretold his denials, he was fully responsible for them. Likewise, the Jewish leadership is clearly predestined to reject the cornerstone (Mk. 8, 10, 11), and yet they will be held accountable for their unbelief. As Jesus says elsewhere, "The Son of man will go as it has been decreed (= God's sovereign plan; the decree may be God's eternal plan, or OT prophecy, but either way it is foreordained), but woe to that man who betrays him (= human responsibility)." The gospel of Mark, like the rest of Scripture, views God as absolutely sovereign, the planner, ruler, and controller of everything that happens within his creation. At the same time, human characters are not puppets on strings; they make free and responsible choices. Biblical theology is a highly nuanced version of compatibilism.

Gethsemane is important background to the dual trials of Peter and Jesus. In Gethsemane, Jesus cowered before his Father, while Peter slept. But when the trials begin, Jesus is calm and bold before men, while Peter cowers before young girls. Jesus prayed in the Spirit and so stayed strong; Peter was still walking in the flesh because he had not entered into prayer as preparation for temptation.

Jesus was humble, while Peter boasted. Jesus was a king but lived like a servant. Peter strutted around like a king (cf. the rooster), when in reality he should have acted as a servant. Jesus stooped to serve and suffer, while Peter figured he must be above suffering so he exalted himself as an invincible superdisciple.

I barely touched on this in the sermon, but someone (Jeff Meyers perhaps) has pointed out that the disciples had everything a non-supernatural, liberal version of “Christianity” says we need. They had education, example, training, etc. But they still fell away. This is why naturalized, secularized, liberal versions of the faith never survive. They are fleshly and weak. They miss the need for grace, for the Spirit, so they leave their adherents stuck in the old Adam and the old creation and the old humanity. They can withstand any kind of trial and testing.

Peter is a warning to us all. Peter had been very satisfied with himself. He had been very confident in himself. He even asserted he was superior to the other disciples (14:29) – even if they were to fall away in the coming battle, he would not! But the delusions of grandeur came crashing down at daybreak when the rooster crowed and Peter realized what a pompous fool he had been. He had thought he was strong enough he didn’t even need to pray in Gethsemane – he could just get some shut eye! He was sleeping when he should have been praying and so later on that night, he was fearful when he should have been alert and bold. He was still in the flesh and the flesh failed him. When the light of judgment came, when he went through a fiery trial, he was exposed as a coward and a fraud. He fell into blasphemy and full blown apostasy; he sinned against Jesus with a high hand.

On the flaws/cracks in Michaelangelo’s David statue:
<http://www.breakpoint.org/bpcommentaries/entry/13/29859>.