Jesus Before the High Priest

Matthew 26:57-75

(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh.)

1. The Rush to Judgment
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Matthew recorded the betrayal of Christ in Matthew 26:47-56. Judas made arrangements to betray Christ to the high priests and elders of Israel and identified Christ clearly for the crowd sent to seize Him, and Christ was arrested. In the midst of all of this, it was clearly demonstrated that Christ was sovereignly in control. Even in the events of His arrest and the trials, God’s plan was being worked out in detail. When Peter rushed to defend Christ with his sword, Christ’s response was that He could ask His Father for more than twelve legions of angels and they would be instantly there. So things were not out of control. When John recorded the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, he wrote that when they came to take Christ, they asked if He was the one they were looking for and He identified Himself, then they all fell back to the ground overwhelmed with the display of His glory and presence. Christ was not arrested because He was caught off guard or unable to defend Himself, but it was the time in the plan of God for the Son of God to be arrested and to be executed, and it was in accord with what Christ prophesied. All the disciples turned and ran away; they were all overwhelmed by their fear and abandoned Christ to stand on His own.

1. The Rush to Judgment

It was the intention of the religious leaders in Israel to dispose of Christ as quickly as possible so He was rushed to trial very quickly. Their biggest concern was that there be no rebellion or riot on the part of the people, and that is why they arrested Christ in the middle of the night when the general populace would be in bed. They wanted to have Christ go to trial and have Him executed so quickly that there would be no time for any opposition to gather. Many of the people thought that Christ was a great prophet although they did not believe in Him as their Messiah. The concern of the religious leaders was that if the people had a chance to reflect on what was happening, they might have revolted against the Jewish leadership. That would result in intervention by the Romans; the Romans would put down the revolt but they would also dispose of the leaders of Israel because they were unable to keep the people under control. This explains the hurried procedure that took place.

Christ went through two basic trials, each having several aspects. Keep in mind as you read different gospel accounts that more than one trial took place, and with each trial there were a variety of stages. The two trials very simply were ecclesiastical and civil trials. The ecclesiastical trial was a Jewish trial before the Jewish high court. Then He was tried in a civil court before the
Romans. The trial before the Jews was an attempt to identify Him as a guilty person who had committed crimes that under Jewish law deserved death. The Romans had taken away from the Jews the power of capital punishment, so the Jews had to turn Christ over to the Romans and ask them to carry out the sentence that the Jews handed down since it was death.

The Jewish or ecclesiastical trials were often broken down into three parts and they blended together so much it was sometimes difficult to tell whether there was one with a lot of parts or three distinct aspects. The first of the three distinct aspects was before Annas as recorded in John 18 after the arrest in the garden. Annas was the father-in-law of the high priest and had been high priest himself, a very powerful figure in Israel. Then Jesus was taken before Caiaphas who was the present high priest, son-in-law of Annas. As high priest, Caiaphas functioned as “president” of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the high court in Israel. And third Jesus was brought again before the Sanhedrin for final disposal after they had a chance to reflect on the case, and they turned Him over to the Romans. After the Sanhedrin turned Him over to the Romans, He was taken before Pilate. Pilate evaluated Jesus and His case and sent Him to Herod functioning under Roman authority as a civil ruler. Herod spent some time with Christ and sent Him back to Pilate, and there the final verdict was rendered.

The two trials, first before the Jews and then before the Roman authorities, and then the climax with the execution of Christ, all occurred in the time between the middle of the night, perhaps 2:00-3:00 in the morning, until 9:00 in the morning. These things were happening very, very rapidly so that by the time the population woke up in Jerusalem that morning, the decisions had been made and the crucifixion was imminent and there would be no chance for any resistance to build among the people.

2. The Ecclesiastical Trial

Matthew 26:57 says, “Those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together.” Matthew put the emphasis on Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin gathered together while John 18 included the soldiers taking Him to Annas first. Matthew’s reference to the high priest, Caiaphas, the scribes and the elders, was a reference to the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court in Israel. It was composed of scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and elders, the leading religious leaders in Israel, and included representatives from each group. The Sadducees dominated the Sanhedrin. The high priest, who was the president of the Sanhedrin, was himself a Sadducee. There were 71 members of this high court, but it only took 23 members for a quorum in this kind of case. It is important to understand this because it may explain why an individual like Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea was absent or present but silent; yet they came and asked for the body of Christ after the crucifixion. Why didn’t they speak up? Well, they may not have been there because this was all rigged; it was a set-up. And Caiaphas and Annas, having rigged this situation, would not invite or tell those members of the Sanhedrin who might have some resistance towards this mock trial. They did not need all 71 members. We do not know how many members of the Sanhedrin were gathered, but they had to have 23 to have a quorum according to Jewish law.

There were several areas of Jewish law violated. There are records of what Jewish law was in the time of Christ, for example in the Talmud, so comparing what the Jews did with their own law
revealed that several rules of their own law were broken. I will note them and they will be demonstrated during the trials of Christ at various times through the closing section of Matthew.

First Christ was taken to Caiaphas, but Jewish law said He was supposed to have a defense attorney. Similar to our laws today, a person put on trial needs an attorney to defend him. And for a fair trial, it is felt that an attorney ought to be provided even if the person can’t afford it. Jewish law required that a defendant be provided a defense attorney. Obviously, Jesus was provided no such person.

Some of the proceedings seemed to take place in the house of Caiaphas as Christ was moved around from place to place yet Jewish law said that trials had to take place within the temple precincts. Interestingly, Jewish law said that in capital cases where the death penalty was being considered, testimony could not be heard during the night hours. The law was very specific. It said that to hear testimony in a capital case, the members of the Sanhedrin must be alert and awake. Therefore, they were forbidden to hear any testimony during the night hours because they might be groggy or drowsy. In addition, in capital cases, Jewish law required two days to pass between the hearing of the testimony and the rendering of a verdict. Again the law was very specific; they were to hear the testimony, then go home for two days and two nights to rest well, to eat lightly, eating a specified diet so that they would have alert minds and alert bodies to consider the evidence carefully over those two days, then come back and render their verdict. In Jesus’ case the Sanhedrin heard this testimony in the middle of the night: it seems that it was about 3:00 a.m. when Jesus was taken to Caiaphas’ house, and they rendered their verdict immediately on the spot so that by later that same morning, they were ready to call for crucifixion by the Romans. It was a mock trial; it was set up with no real attempt in any serious way to follow true Jewish law. Even the Romans and Pilate saw through it and declared that He was an innocent man, that the whole thing was a mockery.

After Matthew indicated that Christ was taken to Caiaphas, he told that Peter was following Jesus. This is important because, at the end of the chapter, Matthew returned to unfold the story of Peter. “But Peter was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome” (Matt. 26:58). Peter was present during the trials, and he showed a mixture of courage and cowardice. Matthew 26:56 says that all the disciples fled, so it might seem that Peter would still be running north for Galilee because he was from Galilee. If he wanted to save his hide, the safest thing would be to get back to Galilee as fast as he could. But Peter followed Him. According to the Gospel of John, John was also present in the courtyard; so at least two of the disciples turned back. In fact they all stayed in the general area because later they assembled in the upper room, but Peter was following Him and that took courage. He knew that Christ was being taken by a mob that wanted to destroy Him, and this same mob would also like to destroy his immediate followers! So Peter was evidencing some courage, but it was the courage of a coward, so to speak, because Peter was following Him at a distance.

Peter did not want to be associated or identified with Christ; but he was torn. You have probably had those same feelings if you have been a believer very long. There are situations in which you feel that you should take a stand for Christ, and on the inside you know you ought to tell people that you are a follower of Christ and what it means to have salvation in Christ. But you’re afraid
to take a stand and say that you are a believer in Jesus Christ. Peter was torn, so he was following at a distance, and that would turn out to be the ruin of Peter. You can’t be a courageous coward; the cowardice overcomes your courage when you’re in that kind of a situation. And it brought disaster to Peter.

3. False Testimony Against Jesus

Matthew 26:59 begins to describe the trials, “Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death.” Remember earlier in Matthew 26 it said the chief priests had already determined that Jesus had to die. “Then the chief priests and elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him” (Matt. 26:3-4). In fact, Caiaphas, the chief judge in these proceedings, was the one who said in John 11:50, “It is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.” Jesus was brought before a court that had already met and that had already rendered its verdict. They were trying to gather enough evidence to make the proceedings look at least somewhat legitimate. Matthew 26:60 says, “They did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward.” They needed two witnesses that agreed. The law said, “By the mouth of two or three witnesses something will be established.” They needed two people who would lie, but would lie in a coordinated way; but since things were taking place in the middle of the night, they hadn’t really had enough time to work through the situation and get two people to sit down together, work on their stories, and then come before everyone and tell them in a way that the stories would match. There were a lot of people who were willing to lie; but to get two liars to say the same thing was a problem. All the chief priests wanted was some semblance of legality so that the Jewish nation would believe they carried on a real trial with two witnesses whose testimony condemned this man.

Finally, two witnesses came forward as described in Matthew 26:60-61, “But later on two came forward, and said, ‘This man stated, “I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.”’” These two witnesses agreed that Jesus had said, “I’ll destroy the temple of God and I’ll rebuild it in three days.” Note two things before reviewing the passage in which Christ said what they say He said. First, they did not accurately report what He said; and secondly, they did not understand what He meant in what He said. So they were lying about both what He said and the meaning they gave to what He said.

The incident is recorded in John 2:19, “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’” He did not say, “I will destroy the temple of God.” He said, “You destroy this temple, and I’ll raise it up.” For the Jews to speak against the temple was blasphemy, a very serious crime, because the temple was the dwelling of God. To speak against the temple was to speak against God, and to speak of destroying the temple was to speak about striking against God. But John 2:21 indicates that He was speaking of the temple of His body. So He was saying “You destroy this temple (which is My body), and I’ll raise it up in three days.” He was not talking about an act of violence against the temple in Jerusalem at all. Even the Sanhedrin recognized that this testimony was based on a foundation of sand; they couldn’t build a case on it. But they were going to use it as a starting point: they had two witnesses who were saying something, but it was going to be hard to get a handle on it!
In Acts 6, this issue of the temple was also used when Stephen was on trial for his life before the Sanhedrin. Acts 6:12-14 says, “And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. They put forward false witnesses who said, ‘This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.’” They were false witnesses lying in what they said, and they twisted the story in the same way. They say he was speaking against the temple and therefore against God.

The religious leaders were about to execute an innocent man who was the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel. They had no compulsion, no reservation at all, about condemning to death an innocent man on the basis of lies that they fabricated. But these same men were so jealous of the temple that they would die for it, and many of them did. This illustrates a situation that always happens: The further men and women move away from the truth of a real, living relationship with the eternal God, the more important external, physical things associated with religion become. These religious people in Israel had no true relationship with the true and living God or His Son, but they were so committed to the temple, the physical site of religious activity, that they would die for it. We ought to keep this in mind, because this pattern occurs gradually. The more people deteriorate religiously, the more the focus of their religious life moves from the internal to the external, even today. There are people who will battle till their grave over the church building. They or their parents may have helped build the building and they will tear the church body into a thousand pieces before they give up! Why? Because that physical place has become so crucial and so important to them. It happens to people who go to a certain place and that place becomes hallowed and sacred; that building or that site becomes honored and revered. They come to believe that it is the place where they met with God! That was how the Jews viewed the temple. They were a people who had no relationship with God. We need to be very careful, even as believers, that we do not subtly allow the focal point of our relationship with God to be turned to a particular site so that we think when we go to that place in that building, that is when we meet with God and commune with Him. If you are not communing with Him on a regular moment by moment, day-by-day basis, then you cannot meet with Him at a specific place. What we do when we come together in a given spot as a group of believers is to bow before Him and offer Him our worship and allow the Spirit of God to minister to us together. There is nothing sacred about a site. The externals become the focal point when the internals are gone and no longer exist. That’s the way it was in Jerusalem. It is amazing that the Lord of the temple, the One who is to be worshipped in the temple, stood before them but they rejected Him and sentenced Him to death, while they claimed to be honoring that building. What a travesty!

In Matthew 26:62-63 it reads, “The high priest stood up and said to Him, ‘Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?’ But Jesus kept silent.” The frustration of the high priest was building; he was in a dilemma! He has made a scene! He was prepared for the arrest of Christ. He awakened Pilate in the middle of the night and had gotten soldiers to come and arrest Christ. He was holding a trial, but he could not get any witnesses to testify against Christ so they could find Him guilty. What would happen to his credibility if he had to let Christ go? He would have to go back to Pilate and tell him there were no witnesses, even though he had told Pilate this man was a criminal, clearly worthy of condemnation. What
would be the chance of Caiaphas ever getting Christ arrested again? So he had to come through with a guilty verdict, and he couldn’t even get the witnesses to lie together and when they did say something, it was not enough; so he wanted Christ to say something! But as Isaiah 53:7 said, Christ stood before His accusers as a sheep led to the shearsers; He was speechless, He did not answer them, He did not respond. In his very presence the Scripture was being fulfilled, but the high priest of Israel was so blinded by his prejudice and unbelief that he was set in rejecting Christ.

4. Jesus’ Response to the High Priest

Then the high priest fell back on his authority. Matthew 26:63 continues, “And the high priest said to Him, ‘I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.’” That was a statement of failure! The high priest could not come up with any witnesses, so he wanted Jesus to testify against Himself! And by saying “I adjure You!” he was taking an oath before God, on the basis of his office as high priest in Israel, that Jesus must speak. But it was also a statement of weakness. The high priest was admitting that nobody could condemn Him. In spite of three years of ministry and life among the Jews, there weren’t two people who could agree on an area where Jesus would deserve condemnation. So the high priest demanded that Jesus tell them whether He was the Christ, the Son of God. The ‘Son of God’ is the recognized title of the Messiah. Peter had declared in Matthew 16 that he believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. It is interesting that this demand on the part of the high priest became the occasion for Christ for the first time, at the climax of His ministry, to stand and openly declare to the nation Israel that He was the Messiah of Israel. It had been presented in a variety of ways, but this was the first open, public declaration to the nation, before its governing body, that Jesus was the Messiah.

Jesus responded very clearly in Matthew 26:64, “Jesus said to him, ‘You have said it yourself nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.’” In other words, “You’re exactly right. That’s who I am, the Christ, the Son of God. And furthermore, let Me expand that for you. I am the Christ, the Son of God, and I stand before you now on trial with you as My judge. But I want you to know something: there is coming a time in the future when you will stand before Me with Me as your judge.” It is remarkable how He came right to the point, “I am the Messiah, I am the Son of God. That has serious implications for your trial that’s coming up.” He quoted Scripture using a portion of Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13. When He said He would be sitting at the right hand of Power, He was referring to God. Power is another name for God because God is the source of power, and at the right hand is the position of authority. The Messiah will be seen sitting in the position of authority and power, coming in glory. In the future, they would stand before Him to be judged. Can you imagine the shock on the face of the high priest and those of the Sanhedrin at Christ’s response? What an awesome scene! The Son of God, the Son of Man, the Judge of all mankind was on trial before men who would someday stand before Him.

This is a good reminder for us, Philippians 2:10-11 says, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Every man, woman and child is someday going to stand before Christ as the Judge. Isn’t that interesting? It is
the same today. People are exposed to the truth of Jesus Christ as the Savior, the One who died for them, and they are called to make a decision regarding Him, the One before Whom they will one day personally stand to be judged. It behooves us, doesn’t it, to take seriously that relationship we have with Him.

5. The High Priest Asked for a Guilty Verdict

It would have been better for the high priest of the Sanhedrin to stop right there and be very sure. If He is the Christ, if He is the Son of God, then He is our Judge. But the high priest immediately went through a hypocritical display of grief and agony. “Then the high priest tore his robes and said, ‘He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?’” (Matt. 26:65-66). The high priest tore his garments and lamented the response, declaring it to be blasphemy. He ought to have stopped at this point to consider the evidence. They now had a response; He claimed to be the Messiah, the Judge. They had been confronted with evidence, but they did not want to consider it. In John 11 when Caiaphas said it was necessary for Christ to die, they also decided at that same meeting that they ought to kill Lazarus too, because Lazarus being alive was a testimony to the power of Christ to raise the dead! They were not looking for evidence; they were looking to destroy and hide any evidence that existed! But he tore his robes and proclaimed, “He has blasphemed!” Maybe, if Jesus hadn’t told the truth. The issue was, did He tell the truth or not? This was a sham, see the hopelessness of it? The high priest asked, what need do we have of witnesses? But there weren’t any, right? The high priest asked, what do you think? But they had already decided the verdict; that was made obvious at the beginning of Matthew 26.

They rendered an immediate verdict, and immediately things came apart; all decorum vanished. “They answered, ‘He deserves death!’ Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, and said, ‘Prophesy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?’” (Matt. 26:66-68). What amazes me is that things are still not out of control from God’s perspective. According to Isaiah 50:6, “I gave My back to those who strike Me, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.” It was prophesied that they would take the Messiah and hit Him in the face with their fists, slap Him, and spit in His face. It appears that things came unglued and were out of control, but these wretched, sinful men in their rebellion against Christ were fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah centuries earlier. What a way to carry on a trial! First of all they looked for a reason to declare Him guilty, and then they began to abuse Him.

6. Peter Denied the Lord

Matthew returned to Peter who was sitting in the courtyard. It’s very important to look at what Peter went through. I always find it unpleasant to read about the failures and flaws of great men and women of God. If I had been in charge of writing the Old Testament, for example, I would have left out David’s great failure, the fact that he sinned with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah. He was a man after God’s own heart; he was the sweet Psalmist of Israel. I don’t like to read about his failure. One of the evidences of the truthfulness of Scripture is that it records not only the beautiful things, but also the not-so-beautiful things about the saints of God. They were simply frail human beings, men of like passions as the Book of James refers to them. Peter also
was a great man of God, a great servant of Jesus Christ. He walked with Christ during His earthly ministry and walked on the water to Christ! He was the only other man, other than Christ, as far as we know, who was ever privileged to walk on water! He was greatly used in the founding of the church in Acts. But Matthew records a great failure on Peter’s part.

Something else to learn from this is a bit about the schemes of the devil and how he works. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 2 that we are not to be ignorant of the schemes of the devil. I never cease to be amazed, when I read a section like this, at how brilliant the devil is in using the little everyday things to trap and ensnare the followers of Jesus Christ. “Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came to him and said, ‘You too were with Jesus the Galilean’” (Matt. 26:69). Peter was confronted by a little servant-girl. Who would have expected it? Peter was probably concerned about whether the high priest might recognize him, or one of the members of the Sanhedrin or a Roman soldier? So he was trying to be inconspicuous, fading into the woodwork, so to speak. All of a sudden out of nowhere, the last one you would expect any problem from, a little slave-girl said, “You were with Jesus the Galilean” and Peter was totally caught off guard.

Peter, who earlier in the evening had declared he would die with Christ before he would deny Him, was confronted by a little slave-girl. Matthew 26:70 says, “But he denied it before them all, saying, ‘I do not know what you are talking about.’” He was caught off guard and unprepared, and he was intimidated by this little slave-girl because there were others around. He was sitting with this group, just trying to be one of them, when this little slave-girl pointed him out, and he felt constrained to make an open denial. Satan was beginning to reel him in. It started out by the fact that Peter was following Christ from far away. He had already made his decision that he didn’t want to be identified with Him or be associated with Him. But Peter was not a Judas! He just couldn’t abandon Him! So what’s he to do? He put himself in an unlivable situation. If you were a follower of Jesus Christ, but you didn’t want to be associated with Christ, where were you going to go? And the question from this servant-girl, her accusation, caused him to deny, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Once Satan begins working in an area in which he knows he’s effective, it seems like he’s relentless. Have you ever had that feeling that Satan’s got a hold of you by the throat and you’re on the ground and he’s just pumping away like crazy? This is a little bit of the feeling you get with Peter. Satan knocked Peter off his feet; he was ready to hit him again.

Peter thought it was a good time to change locations, Matthew 26:71, “When he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, ‘This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.’” Satan decided if it worked the first time, it will work the second time! Another servant-girl pointed out to another group near the gateway where Peter had moved, “Hey, look over here; this man was with Jesus of Nazareth!”

Peter was being backed up a little more and he decided he had better make his statement a little firmer! “And again he denied it with an oath, ‘I do not know the man.’” (Matt. 26:72). He said he not only didn’t know what she was talking about, he did not even know Jesus. And he solidified it with an oath. An oath is where you swear by something greater than yourself or something sacred. It isn’t clear what he swore by, perhaps in light of the day, he swore by the temple or by the sacrifice that he made that day. We don’t know what he said, but he wanted to
make a firm statement so that he took an oath declaring he did not know Jesus in the presence of a slave-girl and some of those who were around him. He has denied Christ twice at this point. He was feeling even more pressured. Have you ever been in a similar situation, perhaps at your job or with people you know are unbelievers, and you had the opportunity to identify yourself as a believer in Christ but you were afraid to take a stand, and things deteriorated and degenerated and it became even harder to take a stand because the immediate question would be, why didn’t you say something before? You can sense the panic building in Peter. He was in a pressure situation. It is important to recognize the difficulty of the circumstances. At times when I’ve been embarrassed to be publicly identified with Christ, my life wasn’t on the line; but Peter was observing the trial of the Master that He has served and given his life to, and the Messiah was being condemned to death! If Peter identified himself as a follower of Christ, he would be dragged in and it would all be over in an instant of time!

7. Peter’s Third Denial and Repentance

You might have thought Peter would try to get out, but Peter was in a fix. He couldn’t go away. Matthew 26:73 reads, “A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, ‘Surely you too are one of them; for even the way you talk gives you away.’” The bystanders had heard the two servant-girls raise the question, so they were watching Peter. I think what happens here is interesting! The Galileans spoke with a particular accent or brogue. In fact, some said the Galileans weren’t to read the Scriptures in the synagogues in Judea because their brogue was an offense; it was that distinct. It is just like somebody in our country who is from the South and you recognize where they are from just by the way they talk. The Galilean Jews had learned Hebrew with that accent or brogue. The more Peter voiced his denial, the more he was making clear that he was a Galilean who would be identified with Jesus. Isn’t it interesting how even the unbeliever sometimes sees through our hypocrisy? And Peter’s not done.

He multiplied his oaths in Matthew 26:74, “Then he began to curse and swear, ‘I do not know the man!’ And immediately a rooster crows.” It had become more than just taking an oath, now it was taking oath upon oath. Peter became more and more open with the denial. It became more and more of an issue; Peter was trapped. With the cock crowing, something else happened that Matthew perhaps graciously omitted. In Luke 22:60-61 it says, “But Peter said, ‘Man, I do not know what you are talking about.’ Immediately, while he was still speaking, a rooster crows. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had told him, ‘Before a rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times.’” Peter had forgotten what Christ had prophesied concerning him. He had gotten sidetracked; he was no longer spiritually alert. He had put distance between him and his Lord, and starting with a little slave-girl, he was intimidated into denying his Lord three times. As he made that third denial, the cock crowed and Christ turned, having been beaten, slapped, and spit upon, and fixed His eyes on Peter. Can you imagine the overwhelming horror felt by Peter as he realized what he had done? All of a sudden it exploded in his mind, “Before a rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times.” Peter wouldn’t have believed earlier in the evening that anything like that was in any way possible at all. Scripture says that he was overwhelmed with grief.

Matthew 26:75 concludes, “And he went out and wept bitterly.” Peter was full of sorrow and remorse. His sorrow was different than Judas’. Judas had remorse but an ungodly sorrow. Peter’s
repentance was genuine as he poured himself out before God; he recognized how unfaithful he had really been. This is where Matthew left Peter; he does not deal with Peter again through the rest of his book.

In the development of the trial of Christ, religious leaders so blinded by prejudice and unbelief were about to sentence to death the One that Acts 3:15 calls “The author of life,” the creator of all things, that One in whom salvation is found. You need to be careful not to follow the pattern of the religious leaders of the Sanhedrin. It’s possible for you to listen to the Word of God, to be exposed to the truth that Jesus Christ is the Savior and that He died on a cross to pay the penalty for your sins. He was raised from the dead as proof that He had accomplished salvation. But you come so committed to your religious convictions, to your religious practices, that you are blinded to the truth that salvation is by faith in Christ alone. It is possible for you to be part of this local church, maybe even actively involved, perhaps so actively involved that you have never really stopped to consider whether you have a living, personal, vital relationship with the Son of God.

8. Learning From Peter

We ought to take heart from Peter, learn from his example and profit from it. You may know that there are things in your life that would cause you to be desperately ashamed if they were openly exposed like Peter’s failure. We have all followed Peter’s pattern to one degree or another. Have there been opportunities where you could have taken a stand for Jesus Christ and make your relationship with Him clear but you were afraid or ashamed? We are more like Peter than we would like to admit.

I take heart from the message of Peter. Matthew does not relate any more about Peter, but who do we find in charge in those opening chapters of Acts but Peter? The grace of God is amazing, isn’t it? Peter preached the Gospel to the nation Israel on the Day of Pentecost on that first occasion when the Church was established! If I had been in charge, Peter would have gone to the bottom of the list; after all he was not as bad as Judas, but he was not much better. But I have to remember that Peter cast himself on the mercy of God. He was a child of God. He grievously sinned, but the grace of God is greater than our sin. After this event, God took hold of Peter, established him and planted him, so that Peter would be a dynamic servant and leader in the service of Jesus Christ.

This ought to be an encouragement to everyone of us as believers. Not one of us has been as faithful, as we should. Perhaps you have things in your life that are in effect a denial of Jesus Christ and His work in your life. Praise God! It doesn’t have to go on like that. But it does take recognition, as Peter did, that it is sin; it is awful and it is ugly. It takes willingness to turn from that sin and allow God to use my life. I hope we recognize that with one another as well. In our attitude toward one another, we must recognize that God’s forgiveness is complete. We don’t find people holding this over Peter. Peter was free to minister, but he had to become what God wanted him to be.

Are you what God wants you to be? His grace is sufficient to make you what He wants you to be. May it be so for each one of us!