

“JESUS ON TRIAL” **(Matthew 26:57-68)**

When I was in high school, the TV miniseries *Roots* came out, and those who've seen it know that it follows the story of a black slave family as they find their way to freedom after decades of slavery. Throughout the miniseries you feel the injustice and suffering of this family as they are frequently beaten, they have their families torn apart, and they are stripped of their dignity. At the end of the movie one of the slaves, Tom Harvey, who is the great-grandson of Kunta-Kinte – the original slave brought from Africa – is tied to a post and is viciously whipped by his master to the point where he is unconscious. A short time later the civil war ends and the tables are turned. In an act of poetic justice Tom Harvey finds himself holding a whip in his hand with his master tied to a post. He considers taking out his vengeance on his cruel master, but instead leaves him tied to the post, and rides away with his family into a new life of freedom.

The idea of the “tables being turned” is a theme in many books and movies where the one who is victimized and has no power suddenly gains the upper hand over their perpetrator. And we like it – we love justice and fairness and wrongdoers being held accountable. The Bible contains several stories like this – Joseph, after being thrown into a pit and sold into slavery by his brothers, years later is in a position of power – holding the fate of his brothers in his hands. David, after being pursued by Saul for nearly a decade, has the opportunity to kill Saul in a cave. In the book of Esther, Haman is hanged on the same gallows he prepared for Mordecai.

The theme of the “tables being turned” is part of the main storyline of the Bible – which tells how Jesus, being the Son of God – the creator of the universe – seated in heaven with power and glory – sets aside His glory to come to earth as a humble servant. Throughout His life He is mistreated, misunderstood, abandoned by His own family, and targeted with death. Although He is still God and can call down the powers of heaven on His enemies at any time, He holds back that power and willingly places Himself into the hands of His adversaries to be crucified on a cross. But, as we will see in our passage today, Jesus declares that one day the tables will be turned, He will return to His rightly place of power and glory, and one day will come back to earth as judge over all creation.

All this is revealed in our passage today in Matthew 26, as Jesus is put on trial. While His enemies appear to have the upper hand, it is very temporary. As we watch the events of His trial unfold, there is both an encouragement for us, as well as a challenge – which we will talk about at the end.

Jesus is now just hours from going to the cross. On Thursday evening He meets with His disciples in the Upper Room for the Passover meal, and institutes a new meal – the Lord's Supper. After supper, Jesus walks with His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane where He prays, and through prayer finds the strength and resolve to face the cross. Even though He could have called 12 legions of angels to come and evaporate His enemies, He willingly surrenders to the soldiers who come to arrest Him. His disciples scatter and flee, and Jesus is left to face His enemies alone.

Over the next 9-10 hours Jesus will go through a series of six trials. Today it can take months for a trial to even begin, and then several days before it's completed. But Jesus' trials all happen quickly in rapid succession. The first three trials take place before Jewish authorities and the final three trials take place before Roman authorities. Today we want to focus on the three trials before the Jewish court – His own people – and before we get into our text, it's helpful to get a general overview of how the legal, court system worked in Jesus' day.

The Jewish legal system was the best in the world, and was based on the standards of justice God gave to Moses centuries earlier. God told Moses to appoint judges who would be fair and impartial – who would not take bribes or pervert justice. Our American laws are based on the same foundational principles of truth and justice laid out in the Mosaic law.

A few hundred years before Jesus, a Supreme Court was established in Israel – called the Sanhedrin – which means “assembly” or “council” – and the Sanhedrin was made up of seventy men. The Sanhedrin was made up of 24 chief priests and 46 elders. Many of the elders belonged to other religious groups such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the teachers of the law. The head of the Sanhedrin, and the most powerful man in Israel, was the high priest. The position of high priest goes all the way back to Moses’ day, and he was the one chosen to lead the people in worship and act as a go-between between God and man. It was a sacred, holy position.

By Jesus’ day, the office of high priest, as well as the Sanhedrin, had devolved into a mostly political body. This was due in part to the fact that they were ultimately ruled by Rome – as was the rest of the world – and the high priest and the Sanhedrin had to answer to Rome. Rome gave them a great deal of power, as long as they used their power to keep peace and order and benefit Rome. If you got out of line with Rome, you lost your job. God designed the high priest to be a lifetime position – like our Supreme Court justices – but under Rome high priests came and went – a new one being appointed about every four years.

The current high priest – during the time of Jesus – was Caiaphas. Caiaphas has served as high priest for 18 years, which suggests that he knew how to cooperate with Rome. But, as we’ll learn, the real power – the one with the influence and gravitas – was Annas – Caiaphas’ father-in-law – who had served as the high priest twenty years earlier. For political reasons, Rome removed Annas from office, but the next five high priests were all sons of Annas, so he was still considered the patriarch of the high priestly family and still called the shots. Even though his son-in-law Caiaphas is now the high priest, Annas is still regarded by the people of Israel as the real high priest and the one wielding the power.

Not only had the high priest and the Sanhedrin turned into political positions, both institutions had become incredibly corrupt. Annas and his family had turned the high priesthood into a money-making racket. For example, during Passover, if someone brought a lamb to be sacrificed at the temple, they’d say, “This lamb is unfit, but we have some really quality ones right here in the temple you can buy.” And they’d jack the price up way high and make loads of money off people simply coming to worship.

Another scheme they had was when out-of-towners came to Jerusalem and paid their yearly temple tax, the temple people would say, “We only accept Jewish currency, but would be happy to exchange your money for you.” The moneychangers then inflated the rates and made an enormous profit. This is why Jesus twice went into the temple and flipped over the tables of the moneychangers and drove them out, saying, “How dare you turn my father’s house into a den of robbers.”

It’s no wonder that Annas and Caiaphas and the rest of the Sanhedrin want to kill Jesus. Not only is He a threat to their business interests, He’s a threat to their whole political structure. Rome loved peace and tranquility, and if Jesus continued to gain followers and clash with the established power of the Sanhedrin, Rome might step in and strip them of all their power.

Their hatred of Jesus has been building for three years and finally reaches a boiling point. Some months earlier the Sanhedrin meet and decide that Jesus must die. He's getting too popular, and too much of a threat. Caiaphas says, "It's better that one man die than for the whole nation to perish." They've already decided to kill Jesus – they're just waiting for the right time and opportunity – to eliminate Him in a way that doesn't cause a riot among the crowd that likes Jesus and incite the wrath of Rome. Judas' offer to betray Jesus and take them to Him secretly – under the cover of darkness – provides that opportunity.

John's gospel tells us that Jesus is first taken to Annas for the first of three Jewish trials. Many scholars feel that Annas and Caiaphas lived near each other – perhaps even in separate wings of the same palace, and shared the same courtyard where Peter sat by the fire. The whole goal of Jesus' hearing with Annas is to trump up a charge against Him. The Roman authorities held the final decision regarding capital punishment, so they must find some charge that will convince Rome to go along with their desire to kill Jesus. Annas says, "Tell me about your teachings." It's an open-ended question designed to trap Jesus into saying something that will incriminate Him.

In John 18:20-21 Jesus responds by saying, "I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said." Jesus doesn't fall for the trap. He knows that in Jewish law it takes two credible witnesses to convict someone. He says, "You should be able to find thousands of people who've heard me teach. Go find them."

Verses 22-24... When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded. "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Everything about Jesus' three Jewish trials is rigged and illegal. In fact, there is actually a Facebook page **SLIDE** set up by an interfaith alliance that is raising money to have an official retrial in Israel's Supreme Court. The goal of this trial, they say, is to bring peace between Jews and Christians. How interesting. If such a retrial ever did take place, there's no doubt Jesus would be exonerated. All someone has to do is point out the number of illegalities that took place at Jesus' original trial.

To start with, you could not try someone at night – it had to be open and public. A trial could not be held on a festival day – they're doing it on Passover. No one could be arrested without a charge – they had already made up their minds to kill Jesus. A defendant had a right to counsel and time to prepare a defense – Jesus had none of that. And, of course, you could not strike a defendant. All the rules are thrown out with window with Jesus. It's clear that they're not seeking justice – they're seeking any way they can to eliminate Him.

After Jesus' hearing before Annas, He is sent next to Caiaphas, and we pick up the story in Matthew 26: 57-58... "Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome."

While Jesus is meeting with Annas, the members of the Sanhedrin show up in the dead of night – not the normal time of a trial. They're part of the conspiracy to arrest and convict Jesus, and now they gather in the early morning hours to be something like a grand jury to find incriminating evidence to use against Jesus. As they gather in the palace of Caiaphas, Peter sits outside in the courtyard.

Verses 59-60, “The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.” The only reason they’re trying Jesus, instead of just killing Him, is because they don’t have the legal power to put someone to death. Only Rome can do that, and they’re looking for compelling evidence to present to the Roman authorities. The problem with Jesus is that He is the perfect Son of God – they can’t find any dirt on Him whatsoever. Pilate will later say, “I find no fault in this man.” They desperately search for anything – any tidbit, any little thing they can exaggerate and build a case on – even if that means getting a witness on the stand who will lie.

In our court system, witnesses are required to raise their right hand and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Our whole justice system is based on telling the truth. Our son Matt’s father-in-law – named Rob – works for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police conducting polygraph tests. As far as I know, he did not polygraph Matt before he married his daughter. I was asking Rob about his work and he said that lying is especially common in cases regarding child custody – one or both parents will make things up to make the other parent look bad, and false allegations can ruin someone’s life. Truth is foundational to society.

The Sanhedrin, who are supposed to be Israel’s spiritual leaders, run right over the ninth commandment – thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor – in their effort to frame Jesus. In order to convict someone, they must find two witnesses – independent from each other – who will bring the same accusation against Jesus. A number of witnesses come forward saying Jesus said this or Jesus did that, but their testimonies don’t line up. They’re not good liars. They’re just making things up.

Finally, two witnesses step forward with allegations that seem to be credible. 60b-61 says, Finally two came forward and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’” This is a good example of hearing something, taking it out of context, and twisting it. They’re referring to the time early in Jesus’ ministry when He drove the moneychangers from the temple. Some of those watching asked for a sign to prove His authority to do this. Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19).

Threatening to destroy the temple would certainly be grounds for capital punishment in the Jewish court – the temple was the sacred place of God and would be considered blasphemy to destroy it in any way. Furthermore, the Roman authorities would consider such a threat to be terrorism and a threat to civil order. This sounds like just the charge against Jesus they’ve been looking for.

But that’s not what Jesus said, exactly. When Jesus said, “Destroy this temple,” He was not talking about the destroying the temple building, He was talking about the death of His own physical body. He would die, but three days later He would be raised. He was not threatening to blow up the temple.

Verses 62-63... Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” But Jesus remained silent. Jewish law required that a defendant answer His accusers, but Jesus says nothing. Why doesn’t He stand up for Himself and fight? I believe Jesus is following the principle He taught in the Sermon on the Mount where He says, “Do not throw your pearls before swine.” Jesus’ knows they’ve already made up their minds and that anything He says won’t matter. By remaining silent, Jesus preserves His dignity and power. He doesn’t squander His words on those who are committed to His demise.

Likewise, as we represent Christ to the world, we need to be wise in how we deal with people. There are times to speak up and freely share the gospel when people are receptive. There are also times when people are resistant and argumentative, and we need to back off, pray for them and wait for another opportunity.

Jesus' silence provokes Caiaphas... verse 63b says, The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Under Jewish law a high priest could force a person to testify, and now Caiaphas cuts right to the chase: State right now, under oath, if you are the Messiah, the Son of God. If Jesus says, "Yes," then He's claiming to be God – and if He claims to be God, then He is committing blasphemy – and under the law of Moses, blasphemy is a capital crime.

Every member of the Sanhedrin waits for Jesus' answer. This may be the moment they've been waiting for. This time Jesus is not going to remain silent. The time has come for Him to force their hand and follow through on their threat to kill Him. Verse 64a, "You have said so," Jesus replied. Jesus says, "Yes, I am the Messiah and I am the Son of God."

These are the words they've been waiting to hear – it makes Him guilty of blasphemy, a capital offence. If I stood up here this morning and said that I'm the Son of God, I would rightfully be considered a blasphemer. But when Jesus says, "I'm the Son of God – the second person of the trinity – fully God and equal with the Father," He's simply stating the truth. God cannot blaspheme against Himself.

Anyone can claim to be God, and every once in a while some do, but how do you know if they really are? After all, Jesus looked just like you and me – an ordinary man – how were people supposed to leap to the conclusion that He is God come to earth in the flesh. In John 10:37-38 Jesus says, "If I am not doing the works of My Father, then do not believe Me. But if I am doing them, even though you do not believe Me, believe the works themselves, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I am in the Father."

In other words, Jesus says, my works back up my words. Jesus didn't just claim to be God, He proved in His life that He was God. How so? To start with, He lived a sinless life – no one, not even His enemies, could point to a flaw or blemish. Then there are His numerous miracles which demonstrated His power over every realm – over nature, over disease, over demons, and even over death. There are also hundreds of Old Testament prophecies He fulfilled, which we have seen throughout the book of Matthew. And the biggest evidence of all is His resurrection – only God can rise again from the dead. Jesus didn't just make claims, He backed every claim up, proving that He indeed is the Messiah, the Son of God.

But Jesus goes even farther. Verse 64b says, "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Even as Jesus is bound in front of enemies who hate Him and want to kill Him – He's still the one in charge. He's God. He takes two key Messianic prophecies – one from Psalm 110:1 and the other from Daniel 9:27 – passages very familiar to the Sanhedrin, and puts them together to say, "Right now I'm standing before you bound – you're in control – and when you put me to death, you'll think that will be the end of me – but you'll see me sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming in a cloud of glory from heaven to judge."

Jesus left His throne of glory but come to earth, to submit Himself to His enemies and die for the sins of the world. But after His death and resurrection, He returned to His throne in heaven, and today is seated at the right hand of God – the place of glory and honor. In coming to earth Jesus never stopped being God, but He voluntarily accepted the limitations of being a human and set aside the full use of His power. But today He is seated in glory, exalted as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

And He says, “Right now you Sanhedrin are standing over me in judgment – you have the upper hand – you have the power to put me to death – but someday you’ll see me “coming on the clouds of heaven.” In the Bible, clouds picture the glory and presence of God. “Coming in the clouds of heaven” is the same phase Jesus uses in Matthew 24 in speaking of His Second Coming when He returns to earth to judge His enemies. All those who rejected Him – not just the Sanhedrin – but everyone who does not believe on Him for salvation, will stand before His judgment seat and be held accountable for their choice. The tables will turn.

Caiaphas knows exactly what Jesus is saying. Verses 65-68 says, Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” “He is worthy of death,” they answered. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, “Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?”

All the pent-up anger and hostility of these well-respected leaders comes boiling out when Jesus equates Himself with God. Caiaphas rips His clothes, expressing His moral outrage over Jesus’ blasphemy. He says, “What more do we need to hear – you’ve heard what He said – He’s claimed to be deity – what shall we do with Him?” Put Him to death. Then things turn violent... spitting in someone’s face doesn’t them, but it is the ultimate sign of contempt. It’s saying, “You are nobody – I despise you.” Then the real violence begins as they strike him with their fists. They’re full of rage. Other gospels tell us that they blindfold Jesus, and slap Him. They mock Him, saying, “If you are the Messiah, tell us who hit you?”

700 years earlier the prophet Isaiah said, “His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness.” It’s beyond remarkable that Jesus – the creator of the universe, the very Son of God – who could have called twelve legions of angels to incinerate those punching Him, simply takes it. He does not fight back. Why? Because He has a more important goal in mind – to die for my sins and yours. For the joy of seeing you and me be forgiven of our sins, He endured the cross and all that led up to it. He took the punches for us.

Our passage today calls for two responses, and one of them is endurance. Jesus promised that if we bear His name, we too will face persecution and rejection. Some fellow believers around the world are beaten and imprisoned. We can face our persecutors the same way Jesus did – calmly, confidently – not striking back – because we know that when Jesus returns to earth, the tables will be turned, and we will be vindicated and rewarded. Hebrews 12:3 says, “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

The second response this passage calls for is for each one of us to render our verdict of Jesus. We all must decide who Jesus is – is He the Son of God or is He not. We must render our own personal verdict because Jesus is coming back on the clouds of heaven one day to judge. And the good news is this: If you trust Him as your personal Savior from sin, you will not be judged – because Jesus took your judgment for you – so that by believing in Him you are eternally saved and forgiven. You can be assured that when the tables are turned, and Christ returns to judge, you are safe and secure in His arms.