

Tried by Sinful Men

Matthew 26:57-68

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Introduction:

What is it about trials that fascinate us? There is no doubt that they do. Every few years, another high-profile trial captivates our culture—so that the television news networks analyze it 24/7 and magazines put it on the front cover—and we're glued to it. There's no real secret—we are an entertainment-driven culture, and trials are, or are at least made to be, entertaining. They are full of all the things we love: high drama, suspense, the high stakes of the outcome. If you were alive in the 1990s, for example, you cannot forget the O.J. Simpson trial or before that the Menendez brothers. We have whole channels now that exist to dramatize crimes and trials. Lawyers become celebrities!

This is nothing new. Trials have always captivated the attention of people. The Nuremberg trials after WWII, the Salem Witch Trials, Martin Luther's hearing before the Diet of Worms, even the trial of the Greek philosopher, Socrates.

But, however these trials or hearings might have captivated or impacted a society, there can be no doubt that the trial of Jesus Christ of Nazareth was the most important, most impactful, most significant trial in the history of the world. Nothing else can even remotely compare. With the trial of Jesus, sinful mankind literally put God on trial; literally decided that the perfect Son of God was deserving of death. The trial of Jesus was one part of the most wicked sin ever committed by mankind; and yet, His trial was also an integral part of the sovereign and eternal plan of God to bring His Son to the cross and accomplish the greatest good for mankind.

Technically, Jesus was subjected to two trials in five or six parts; and you have to put all of the gospel accounts together to get them all. There was a Jewish trial and a Roman trial. The Jewish trial consisted first of a preliminary hearing before Annas, the former high priest, and then of a hearing before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council), with Caiaphas, the current high priest, presiding. And some also see a third trial the morning after when a larger body of the Sanhedrin formally declared Jesus to be guilty of blasphemy and deserving to be brought before Pontius Pilate for sentencing. The Roman trial consisted first of Jesus brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect (governor) of Judea, then sent to Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, and then sent back to Pilate a second time.

Matthew focuses in on the two most significant parts of the trials of Jesus: His hearing before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin and later his second trial before Pontius Pilate. In our text today, we zoom in on the Jewish trial of Jesus before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin.

And what we need to see here and throughout these remaining chapters is not a passive Jesus that is somehow caught up in a spiral He is helpless to get out of, but rather a Jesus that knows exactly what He is doing and exactly why He is doing it. In this trial we are looking at today, we are to see

that even when faced with the most intense opposition, Jesus Christ was absolutely determined to do the Father's will and follow the path of the cross for us.

In our text, we see Jesus' resolution in the face of opposition in three ways:

- A. Jesus—judged by wicked men (*vv.57-63a*)
- B. Jesus—the true Judge of all men (*vv.63b-64*)
- C. Jesus—condemned for the sake of men (*vv.65-68*)

Exposition:

A. Jesus—judged by wicked men (*vv.57-63a*)

1. The setting

It is immediately after Jesus' arrest in the garden. Those who arrest Him now lead Him to a specific place. If one presumed that Jesus was to be brought to stand trial before the Sanhedrin, He would have been brought to the temple, where such proceedings always took place. But not this time. It is the middle of the night; they cannot wait until morning if they are to have Jesus condemned before the Sabbath comes. So, instead, they take Jesus to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest, where many of the scribes and elders who belonged to the Sanhedrin were filing in.

John tells us that actually, first, they took Jesus to Annas, the former high priest and father-in-law of Caiaphas (*John 18:12-24*), who may have lived in the same extended household, for an informal questioning. Perhaps they were making time for more of the Sanhedrin to show up. But whatever the case, Jesus was eventually taken to stand before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. And in the meantime, we are told that Peter was following at a distance (*v.58*)—but we will wait until next week to get to his story; indeed his trial.

Everything about this passage has the feel of a hastily-thrown together gathering and hearing. They have arrested Jesus, and they may not get another opportunity like this. So, we are told in verse 59 that the chief priests and the "*whole Council*", that is the "*whole Sanhedrin*" were there. Now, this almost certainly doesn't mean that all 71 members of the Sanhedrin were there; Luke tells us, for example, that Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Sanhedrin who had not consented to their plan. But it does seem that representatives of all three constituent bodies of the Sanhedrin were present—the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Only one-third had to be present to make their decisions official.

This Sanhedrin court was the court that mattered in the minds of the Jewish people; however, at this time, the Jewish leaders were not legally allowed to carry out a death sentence. That could only come from an official Roman authority. This was something, then, of a preliminary trial. It was a trial to formulate an agreement to bring Jesus before Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect, and to figure out what charge they would bring against Him.

2. The purpose

Matthew clearly states what the purpose of this trial is in verse 59.

- **Matthew 26:59**—Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death.

This was not a quest for the truth about Jesus. Truth had nothing to do with this trial. This trial was a quest to condemn Jesus. For three years now, the religious leaders of the nation had been seeking to discredit Jesus, to humiliate Him, to trap Him, and even to kill Him. Now that they have Him in their clutches, they are determined to accomplish their goal. This is a trial with a predetermined outcome: to get rid of Jesus once and for all by putting Him to death.

But how are they going to do that?

3. The false witnesses

- **Matthew 26:59**—Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death.

Although the trial had evil motives and illegal elements to it, they still had to abide by some of the stringent laws regarding trials. Evidence was required; and at least two witnesses were required for any serious charge to be brought against someone. But how could they bring charges against a morally perfect man? The only way they could successfully convict Jesus and put Him to death was to bring in false witnesses. Their only recourse against the Truth incarnate was lies—false accusations.

Although they brought many false witnesses forward, they weren't panning out (v.60). What were they saying? Matthew doesn't tell us. Mark tells us that many were giving false testimony, but the problem was their testimony was not consistent—they couldn't get their story straight (*Mark 14:56*)—and a charge would only be considered if two or more witnesses were in agreement. It's not easy to accuse a perfect man of something, even if you are lying.

Finally, two witnesses came forward, in general agreement, and with a more serious accusation (vv.60-61).

- **Matthew 26:60b-61**—But later on two came forward,⁶¹ and said, "This man stated, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.'"

Now this was a potentially serious accusation. Why? First, in most ancient societies, desecration of sacred places like temples was a capital offense. It was taboo—people were executed for it. Second, especially among the Jewish people, there could be no more sacred place than the temple. In Jewish life and thought the temple was the symbol of God's presence among them. For Jesus to talk about destroying the temple was sacrilege. It was unthinkable. And not only that, to talk about destroying it and rebuilding it was to assert an authority over the temple that only God had.

This same accusation was leveled at Jesus as He was on the cross (*Matt.27:40*). Clearly, talking about the temple struck a nerve in people; especially among the religious leaders.

Now, was this accusation true? Jesus did talk about the temple's destruction and rebuilding it, didn't He? Yes—but listen to His exact words early in His ministry when He had come and cleansed the temple the first time of the money changers:

- **John 2:18-22**—The Jews then said to Him, "What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?"¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."²⁰ The Jews then said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?"²¹ But He was speaking of the temple of His body.²² So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

What Jesus said, effectively, was, "If/when you destroy this temple, in three days I will raise it up." And what Jesus was referring to, however cryptically, was to the temple of His own body.

At any rate, Mark tells us that even in this accusation, their testimony was not consistent (*Mark 14:59*). Again, it is hard to falsely accuse a morally perfect man who was consistent in everything He ever said.

Application

Is it hard for people to accuse you of wrongdoing? Don't get me wrong, as followers of Christ we are to expect ill-treatment, persecution, and slanders for the sake of Christ, even for doing what is right. But a Christian should be a hard person to accuse of wrongdoing.

- **1 Peter 2:12**—Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

In other words, of all people, our lives of obedience to God should result in moral uprightness before others. Not perfection, by any means, but an honesty, integrity, kindness, and humility that cannot be easily denied, ignored, or disregarded. I am talking about Christlikeness—living a life before others that makes it hard, even for those who hate you for your commitment to Christ, to accuse you of wrongdoing.

4. The silent response

In all of this, even with the accusation about the temple desecration, the false witnesses are not achieving the result Caiaphas and the religious leaders are looking for. They can't make anything stick. Finally, Caiaphas, the high priest and head of this sham trial, takes over the proceedings, stands up, and says to Jesus:

- **Matthew 26:62**—Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?

That is, "Do you not understand the seriousness of these accusations? What do you have to say for yourself? What is your defense?"

And isn't our first reaction to shout out to Jesus to defend Himself. "They are telling lies! That's not what you said! Tell them, Jesus! Defend yourself!" But instead, "*Jesus kept silent*" (v.63a). Why? Why didn't He say anything in His defense?

a. Jesus was not going to play their game.

There was no point in answering lies. He said these things publicly. If they could produce two who twisted His words, they could produce a hundred who would correct them. Jesus knew they were not after the truth, and He would not entertain them as if this was a legitimate trial.

b. He was fulfilling Scripture.

- **Isaiah 53:7**—He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth.

c. He was determined to do His Father's will and accept the cross.

Jesus had accepted the will of the Father. In the garden, He agonized in His humanity, and yet said, "*not as I will, but as You will*" (Matt.26.39). It must happen this way. He will not try to get out of this; instead, He will stand resolute and firm in order to fulfill the Father's redemptive purposes—handed over to wicked men, suffer unjustly, and die so that through His death He might redeem His people from their sins. Jesus is silent, knowing what is to come—what He must do and not do. The cross is His goal.

Application

We can take lessons from this about how we are to react to accusations against us and about how we are to stand firm in the face of opposition. But, first and foremost, what we are to do here is look at Jesus; stand in awe of Jesus—a man who lived over thirty years in this flesh in this world, and never once sinned against anyone; never once lied, stole, cheated, or gossiped; never once refused or failed to do what God the Father wanted Him to do; never once entertained a sinful thought in His mind. And yet this perfect man, abandoned by His best friends, now standing alone, is being assaulted with lies and accusations over and over and over again. But He does not open His mouth to cry out, "Unjust! "I am innocent of all these charges!" He lets them fall as they may, submitting Himself to the Father's will and plan of suffering and death of us sinners.

B. Jesus—the true Judge of all men (vv.63b-64)

1. The big question

Finally, Caiaphas can't take it anymore. No more beating around the bush. He comes right out with a straight forward question—the big question everyone wants to know the answer to:

- **Matthew 26:63**—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."

For Caiaphas, this is not a question of truth, but a trap. He binds Jesus under oath to answer the question. If Jesus answers, "No, I am not the Christ, the promised Messiah, the Son of God", then He loses His influence among the people—many of whom are ready to crown Him king and Messiah. But if He answers, "Yes, I am the Messiah", then the Sanhedrin has a confession by which they can charge Him.

2. The fateful answer

Jesus answers with a two-part response.

- a. First, with an affirmative yes

- **Matthew 26:64a**—You have said it *yourself*.

Contrary to what it may sound like in our translations, this is an unambiguous "Yes I am! You, yourself, have said it". For the last few years, Jesus has avoided publicly declaring Himself to be the Christ, the Messiah, because of the misunderstanding that the term evoked in people. They all expected the Messiah to be a political figure—a king who would throw off the yoke of the Roman oppressors. But here, finally, with the cross in His view, Jesus publicly proclaims His true identity.

- b. Second, a yes with an explanation

He affirms that He is the Christ, but then immediately explains what that means. "Yes, I am the Christ, as you, yourself have said, and let me tell you what kind of Christ I am."

- **Matthew 26:64b**—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.

He combines two Old Testament scriptures—Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:14. He quoted the same Scripture when speaking to His disciples about Himself and the judgment to come. Now He uses it in front of His enemies to tell them that He is not merely some human Messiah; merely some earthly ruler—He is much, much more than that.

He is the one that David spoke of:

- **Psalm 110:1**—The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."

He is the One Daniel saw:

- **Daniel 7:13-14**—I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. ¹⁴ And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.

This passage clearly tells us of the unique relationship that this Son of Man has with the ancient of days. God gave Him dominion, glory, and a kingdom. What kind of kingdom? An everlasting kingdom which will not be destroyed. This is an affirmation that He is ruler of the world; and affirmation, in fact, of His deity.

Jesus could not have quoted a stronger Scripture. But that is not all Jesus says here, because in quoting Daniel 7, Jesus is also telling them what kind of Messiah He is. He is a Messiah who will judge. It is ironic that while Jesus is being tried, judged, by this pitiful group of jealous and wicked men, in reality, He is the judge of all mankind.

And don't miss this. Why does Jesus now decide to publicly affirm His Messiahship, indeed His deity? Because He is looking to the cross. It is not like He is not falling for Caiaphas' trick here. He knows exactly what He is doing—that by confessing Himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God, He is writing His own death warrant. He is giving them what they want—a reason to put Him to death. Because that is His whole purpose for coming. It must happen this way.

“Thus Jesus submitted to Satan’s scorn and contempt so that He could preserve those for whom He gave His life as a ransom from eternal disgrace.”¹

C. Jesus—condemned for the sake of men (vv.65-68)

Caiaphas got what he wanted—an admission of guilt (because he never even considered Jesus' claim could be true). And for Caiaphas, what Jesus has said amounts to the most serious of crimes—blasphemy. At the time, blasphemy was not just taking God's name in vain or the like, but included claiming a unique association with God—and Jesus could not have claimed a more unique association with God than in identifying Himself as the Son of Man figure in Daniel 7. He is claiming to be the Messiah, the Son of God, the Son of Man who shares God's very throne!

Caiaphas immediately accuses Him of blatant blasphemy. They don't need witnesses to corroborate some false story—they have a confession of guilt. He lays out the charge to the rest of the Sanhedrin present, and they agree—He has blasphemed and there is only one recourse: the death penalty. And on the way, spitting in His face to show absolute derision and disrespect; beating Him to inflict whatever pain they can in the moment; mocking Him as a false messiah, a pretender.

Think of how ludicrous and how evil this is. Men, creatures, sinful creatures, have put God the Son, their maker, on trial. This is the height of wickedness, blindness, and human pride.

¹ Ridderbos, p.506

But we should not be so quick to judge these religious leaders. They are merely a microcosm of the fallen human race. In our sinfulness, we have all put God on trial. We declare Him to be unjust, wrong, or not worthy to be believed or obeyed. Yes, they are guilty of incredible wickedness; yes, they and the Romans are responsible, in a human sense, for crucifying Jesus Christ. But are we any less responsible? Jesus went willingly to the cross for us. It was my sin and your sin that held Him there. We are just as guilty of Jesus' death as Caiaphas and Pilate.

So, Jesus stands condemned by the very people who should have received Him with joy, praise, and worship—the religious leaders of God's people; the most educated of God's people; the most influential among God's people. But position, privilege, and education are no guarantee that you can see Christ for who He is. Indeed, Jesus told just such a privileged, educated, and influential leader that *"unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God"* (John 3:3).

Have you been born again? Do you see Jesus for who He really is? Have you responded in humble submission to Him as Lord, or are you waiting, weighing His claims. Do you really think that you sit in judgment of Him and not see that He is the One judging you? For all of us, let us look again at Jesus. And look again at Him in this hour. There He stands, the Creator of man and all things, allowing Himself to be humiliated, violated, and abused by His creatures. Why? Peter tells us why:

- **1 Peter 2:21-25**—For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, ²² WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; ²³ and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; ²⁴ and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. ²⁵ For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

Hallelujah, what a Savior.

*1 Man of sorrows what a name
for the Son of God, who came
ruined sinners to reclaim:
Hallelujah, what a Savior!*

*2 Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
in my place condemned he stood,
sealed my pardon with his blood:
Hallelujah, what a Savior!*

*3 Guilty, helpless, lost were we;
blameless Lamb of God was he,
sacrificed to set us free:
Hallelujah, what a Savior!*

*4 He was lifted up to die;
"It is finished" was his cry;
now in heaven exalted high:
Hallelujah, what a Savior!*

*5 When he comes, our glorious King,
all his ransomed home to bring,
then anew this song we'll sing:
Hallelujah, what a Savior!²*

Amen.

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² P.P. Bliss, *Hallelujah, What a Savior!*