

THE TRIAL OF JESUS

Part 1.

Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!

Text: Mat 26:63

1) The historical background

Suggested Hymns:

2) The trial

84, 73;330, 48, 288, 65

3) The verdict

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 26:63, “ ... *Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!*” (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Scripture says in Luke 9:44 that we are to “*Let these words sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men.*” During this season of Lent we are going to look at the trial of Jesus.

The pertinent words for today are the words of Annas the high priest, “ ... *Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!*” May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Historical Background

On that Maundy Thursday night there could be seen by midnight, stragglers at the eastern gate of Jerusalem. It was a procession starting from the Garden of Gethsemane, going down the Mount of Olives, across the brook of Kidron, and up the slopes of the city, with Jesus in the midst.

The agony of Gethsemane was over, the arrest had been made, and the Prisoner was being taken to the palace of the high priest, which at that time was occupied by the two prime movers of the black iniquity, Annas and his son-in-law Joseph Caiaphas.

For a better understanding of the events following, a brief account of the historical background must first be given before we can consider the event itself in more detail.

At that time Judea was under Roman rule and was administered by a governor, in this case Pontius Pilate, who usually resided at the seaport of Caesarea. However, during the annual Passover he considered it necessary to establish his headquarters in the ancient palace of Herod.

It was the policy of Rome to flatter the conquered territories with a semblance of self-government and especially to be tolerant in matters of religion.

In general, there were only two rules which had to be faithfully observed: proper regard for the Roman peace, and the payment of taxes. Thus in Judea the Sanhedrin, the ancient tribunal of the church, was still allowed to try all religious offences as well as to punish offenders.

Only if the verdict happened to be a sentence of death, the case had to be retried by the governor, and the carrying out of the sentence, if it was confirmed, was then his responsibility.

In the present case it was at the direction of the Sanhedrin as led by Caiaphas that Jesus was arrested. But as a matter of fact his father-in-law, Annas, an old man of seventy, who had been high priest himself twenty years before, and after him five of his sons and one son-in-law, was still the power behind the throne.

In ancient days the high-priesthood was an office for life, but ever since the days of Herod and the Roman rule the dignity had been degraded from a permanent and sacred religious office to a temporary secular distinction.

No more did the high priests rule by the grace and in the fear of God, but rather by the grace of the Romans and in their own interest.

As to Caiaphas, it was he who as the strange tool of divine prophecy had given the advice *that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.*¹

We read more of how this came about in John 11:47-53. ⁴⁷ *Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs.* ⁴⁸ *"If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation."*

⁴⁹ And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, ⁵⁰ “nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.”

⁵¹ Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, ⁵² and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad. ⁵³ Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death.

As to both Annas and Caiaphas and their whole family, they were cold, haughty, and worldly Sadducees, an able, but an ambitious and arrogant race.

Jealous of their power and fearful of their security, they were filled with deadly hatred against the great Miracle-worker and popular Teacher, who had for the second time cleansed the Temple and interfered with their illicit and greedy gains.

And there was a good reason why Annas, who is remembered by his own people as the head of a viper brood, should strain to the utmost his cruel power to crush a Prophet whose actions threatened to make him and his family wholly contemptible and comparatively poor.

2. The Trial

Jesus was first brought to Annas. This gave him a chance to subject the Saviour to an initial investigation as well as to allow time to get the Sanhedrin together.

Of course, it was not quite legal, but imagine what might have happened if Jerusalem woke in the morning and found the popular Teacher in the hands of His unpopular enemies!

They were determined that Jesus had to be accused, tried, condemned, and delivered into the strong hands of the Romans before morning, and before the multitudes had learned what it was all about. While messengers scoured the city for an urgent midnight meeting, Annas asked Jesus about His disciples and about His teaching.

Christian ministers complain that they do not gain enough disciples for Jesus; but the complaint of Annas was that Jesus Himself was making too many. And the purpose of the questioning was to trick Jesus into some incriminating statement and to convict Him of some charge of secret sedition and unorthodox teaching.

Jesus replies, and for all His calmness His answer involved a stinging rebuke. The questioning is recorded in John 18:19-21, ¹⁹ *The high priest then asked Jesus about His disciples and His doctrine.* ²⁰ *Jesus answered him, "I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing.* ²¹ *"Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said."*

If you really want to learn about Jesus, there is always plenty of chance. But the trouble with most people is their lack of desire.

Then a miserable servant, probably seeing an indignant blush on the high-priestly face, clenched his fist and struck Jesus on the mouth. ²² *And when [Jesus] had said these things, one of the officers who stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, "Do You answer the high priest like that?"*

Imagine, the face which angels behold in wonder, is struck by a contemptible slave! And so often honest truth is met with unrighteous indignation. But without a trace of temper Jesus reproved this impudent transgressor, *"If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?"*

In the mean time the Sanhedrin had been assembled. Into its august presence, the members seated in a semicircle around the high priest, Caiaphas, and his two clerks, whose duty it was to count the votes, Jesus was led. The seventy members themselves, with the high priest as the seventy-first, were made up of Sadducean priests, non-professional elders, and pharisaic Rabbis or scribes.

Ordinarily, in judicial trials, witnesses are on hand. But in this case witnesses had to be found. But, behold, their witness would not agree. Many witnesses were summoned, but the fiasco grew worse and worse. This would not do. If in no other way, incriminating evidence had to be fabricated off the cuff and false witnesses sought against Jesus to put Him to death.

At last two witnesses were brought into approximate agreement, out of which it was hoped a charge could be constructed. It was a statement of Jesus' early ministry about destroying the Temple in three days and building it again.

But while one witness twisted the words to refer to the physical Temple, the other testified that the reference was made to a temple built without hands.

The fact of the matter was that the words of Jesus were neither a command to destroy, nor a promise to restore, the Temple of Jerusalem, but a reference to His death and resurrection. At any rate, it was as clear as day, even to the high priest, that out of these words a successful charge of blasphemy could not be constructed.

We read in Matthew 26:60-63, *Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward⁶¹ and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'"*⁶² *And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?"*⁶³ *But Jesus kept silent.*

Jesus looked on in absolute silence while His disunited enemies confuted each other's testimony. Thus often guilt entangles itself in a net of noisy lies. The best kind of answer to shameless lies is often no answer at all.

As the carefully prepared arrows of perjury fell at the feet of Jesus, as though blunted on the shield of His innocence, it looked as if the enemies would fail for the lack of a few consistent lies.

Overcome with a paroxysm of anger, lest after all his thirst of blood would go unsatisfied, the high priest sprang to his feet. *"Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?"* But Jesus answered nothing.

3. The Verdict

Reduced, then, to utter despair and fury, Annas, the high priest finally remembered one more arrow in his quiver of unrighteousness, and now he drew it forth. It concerned not what properly belonged to the sphere of the court, what the defendant did, but who the defendant was. *"I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!"*

As this question concerned a holy and eternal truth, it had to be answered. Apparently Jesus recognised the right of the high priest to put Him under oath.

At least He saw that silence would have been construed into withdrawal of the assertion He had made regarding His person.

Firmly and solemnly Jesus answered, *“It is as you said.”* For the moment, Jesus said, His accusers were His judges, but some day He would be theirs, for He adds, *“Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”*

It has often been said that Christians claim for Christ what He never claimed for Himself. But here we have a straightforward, properly witnessed affidavit of the deity of Christ.

But what appears as the most glorious truth to the believing heart, was as blasphemy in the horrified ears of the Sanhedrin. The cry of *“Blasphemy!”* reverberated through the hall of the ecclesiastical court. In holy horror the high priest tore his clothes. ⁶⁶ *“What do you think?” They answered and said, “He is deserving of death.”* ⁶⁷ *Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands,* ⁶⁸ *saying, “Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?”*

The foul work of the night had been accomplished. It needed only the technicality of a few hours adjournment to make the sentence entirely legal and binding. According to their law an acquittal could be immediately made; but a capital sentence could not be definitely pronounced until the following day.

But that matter was easily taken care of. During the remaining hours of the night Jesus was left in the coarse and cruel hands of the guard.

And after a brief reassembly of the Sanhedrin early in the morning the initial sentence was speedily confirmed. We read in Luke 22:66-71, ⁶⁶ *“As soon as it was day, the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, came together and led Him into their council, saying,* ⁶⁷ *“If You are the Christ, tell us.” But He said to them, “If I tell you, you will by no means believe. ⁶⁸ “And if I also ask you, you will by no means answer Me or let Me go. ⁶⁹ “Hereafter the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the power of God.”*

⁷⁰ *Then they all said, “Are You then the Son of God?” So He said to them, “You rightly say that I am.” ⁷¹ And they said, “What further testimony do we need? For we have heard it ourselves from His own mouth.”*

“What do you think?” The vote was taken and counted. And the result: *“He is guilty of death.”*

And Jesus? The claw of the dragon was in His flesh and its foul breath in His mouth! Jesus was not condemned for what He did or misdid, but for who He was: Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God, — that we might be made the children of God.

Let us close with two verses of Scripture, 2 Corinthians 5:21 ²¹ ***For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.***

And 1 John 1:7, ⁷ ***But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.*** Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ John 18:14