

The Illegal Trial of Jesus Christ

Communion – Easter – Passion Week

John 18; Matthew 26

Introduction

Let us look behind the scenes today into the system of Hebrew law as we prepare our hearts to better appreciate our Redeemer and Lord.

Let us find out what Isaiah meant when he said that the Messiah would be rejected and condemned and that He would go to the cross . . .

. . . like a lamb that is led to slaughter, [yet] He did not open His mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

Isaiah could not mean that Jesus did not say a word in court, because Christ actually said some rather powerful things, as we will learn. What he meant was that Jesus offered no argument for His defense; He did not seek to vindicate His rights. It is amazing to watch Jesus respond to His legal rights being swept under the rug of religious hypocrisy.

John's Gospel Account of Jesus' Trial

Let us first look at John's gospel account. In chapter 18, we will walk onto the estate of Annas and through the torch-lit courtyard of Caiaphas to watch what actually happened.

In John 18:12-13, we read,

So the Roman cohort and the commander and the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound Him,

and led Him to Annas first; for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.

This text informs us that instead of taking Jesus to the current high priest, they first went to the wealthy estate of Annas. Evidently, Annas had ordered that he get the first crack at this Galilean.

It is not hard to understand why! Annas was the most powerful Jew in Jerusalem. He had served as the high priest some twenty years earlier, yet still had control of virtually everything religious in Jerusalem.

Annas controlled the temple system, the selling of sacrificial animals, the money changing in which exorbitant rates of exchange were charged that amounted to nothing less than bribes and illegal fees.

Annas had set up all of this, and his family controlled it. He had created a religious mafia around the temple.

Jewish historians, in fact, commonly referred to the temple as the "Mall of Annas"; the "Market Place of Annas". Annas had become enormously wealthy off of the people of Israel.

Then, Jesus pulled off the mask! It was Jesus who publicly called the "Mall of Annas" a "den of thieves". He overturned the tables and threw the money changers out of the court of the Gentiles. (Matthew 21:12-13)

In doing this, Jesus was exposing and condemning the corruption of religion in His nation. It is little wonder that Annas wanted to see Jesus before anyone else had the opportunity to do so.

John tells us in verse 19 that Annas questioned Jesus. Even though another man – in this case, Caiaphas – was actually serving in the role of high priest, once a man had served, he was referred to as high priest for the rest of his life. This is much like the way we refer to living, former presidents as "Mr. President" in our own country.

So, Annas wanted to get at this carpenter; this man who had caused him so much heartburn and high blood pressure. Look at John 18:19-20.

The high priest then questioned Jesus about His disciples, and about His teaching.

Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret."

These are loaded words because what Annas is doing is illegal. According to Hebrew law and due process, as we will see later, holding a midnight inquisition was illegal.

Jesus is effectively saying, "Listen, Annas, everything I said, I said out in the open and in the light of day; you, on the other hand, do your dealings in the darkness."

I can imagine everyone tuned in now! Can you picture the men in this room who knew they were

corrupt; who knew Annas was a dirty old embezzler that had probably treated everyone around him with contempt? Everyone in this room had been bought by Annas. He was prime minister, pope, and president all rolled into one. He owned the nation – one did not cross this old man and survive!

John writes in verse 22,

When He had said this, one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, “Is that the way You answer the high priest?”

For years, a gentleman in our church sat on the bench as a judge in downtown Raleigh. I called him and asked what would happen if an accused criminal talked back to him, the judge, and the bailiff turned and punched him in the face? His answer was basically that in his courtroom, if this happened, the bailiff would be held in contempt – he would have a trial all by himself in the near future.

However, this did not happen here!

After this brief exchange, in which Jesus basically “cut to the chase” and exposed the corruption of Annas, John writes in verse 24,

. . . Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

In other words, Annas sent Him to the current high priest.

Matthew’s Gospel Account of Jesus’ Trial

Matthew chapter 26 gives us some details that John’s gospel did not record.

Before we look further, understand that the Hebrew system of jurisprudence was a matter of national pride. The Jews prided themselves on their legal system; most of all, their Supreme Court – the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin, sometimes referred to as the Senate or the Council of the elders, was composed of seventy-one men. There were twenty-three priests, twenty-three scribes, twenty-three elders, the appointed high priest by the Romans, and the true high priest, who would serve for life.

Through the course of this trial, at least six principles of Hebrew law relating to due process were intentionally broken in the Sanhedrin’s hell-driven desire to crucify Jesus. Let me give these as we go beneath the surface in this scene.

1. Law #1 – Trials were not to be held secretly at night, but publicly during the day.

Notice 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.

This is still in the middle of the night. The seventy-one have gathered, with the exception of Annas who is back at his home nursing his ego and guilty conscience.

Get this picture! These are the leading men of Israel – the members of the Supreme Court – coming by torchlight in the middle of the night to the house of Joseph Caiaphas.

In the cover of darkness, these men will try a man who had still not even been indicted. Why? Their single, compelling desire was to crucify Him.

2. Law #2 – The accused was never to be required to speak.

The Hebrews prided themselves in defending and upholding the rights of the accused. They never forced the accused to speak, but gave them the right to be defended.

This law had already been broken by Annas, who demanded that Jesus explain His teachings.

Yet, whenever questioned, as it related to providing any self-defense, the Lamb stood silently. Notice, in verse 62, Matthew tells us,

The high priest stood up and said to Him “Do You not answer? . . .”

Then, we read in verse 63a,

But Jesus kept silent. . . .

This was the silence of innocence; the silence of integrity; the silence of unwavering trust in the Father, who had handed Him this cup of suffering on our behalf. Jesus was willing to drink this cup.

I wonder, what has been the greatest insult against you? What is your deepest injury? Does not the desire to speak on your own behalf rise up within you? “Just give me a chance to defend myself!”

Look at the Savior. He was right – but He was being wronged. And He kept silent even though these judges were desperate to end the trial before dawn revealed their depravity.

So the judges try to drum up witnesses. This leads me to the third violation of Hebrew law.

3. Law #3 – Two witnesses were to come forward and agree on the charges.

The two witnesses had to agree on every point.

Under normal procedures, the witnesses would present their evidence. And they would be questioned separately to ensure their testimony was correct.

Perhaps you have heard about the three high school students who decided to skip school for an hour or two. They came into school and told the principal they had had a flat tire. He immediately sent them to three different corners of his office, gave each of them a piece of paper and a pen, and said, “Now write down which tire it was.”

This will “cut to the chase”.

The testimony of the two witnesses had to agree.

Understand, in fact, that there were never any prosecutors in Hebrew court – the witnesses served as prosecuting attorney and the Sanhedrin served as the defense. And the witnesses were reminded that if they lied, they would be required to pay the penalty that the accused would have received. This had a way of taking care of perjury.

Notice verse 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.

The almost comical thing is that this Council cannot find even two men who can lie consistently. Just where *do* you get reliable witnesses in the middle of the night?!

Mark’s gospel records,

... many were giving false testimony against Him, but their testimony was not consistent. (Mark 14:56)

In spite of this glaring fact, the Supreme Court was pressing for a verdict.

4. Law #4 – Not only was the condemned to be allowed by the Sanhedrin to remain silent, the accused individual was never to be required to have to incriminate himself in any way.

The condemned was never to be asked to testify against himself.

Our country has adopted this same right for the accused. We call it, “pleading the Fifth”. Even our courts today have special considerations against self-incrimination.

Hebrew law allowed Jesus to remain silent, which Matthew 26:63 says He did.

However, it is at this moment that Caiaphas violates another principle of Hebrew law. He stands and takes the position of prosecuting attorney and does something very unusual – it is actually his last chance before dawn! Notice verse 63b.

... 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.”

Caiaphas places Jesus under oath – he set due process aside – and effectively, asked Jesus to incriminate Himself.

Jesus could have remained silent. This was an illegal requirement. It is only now, at this moment that Jesus speaks.

Just as He helped the soldiers arrest Him, He will now help the Sanhedrin condemn Him. Oh, this courtroom drama reveals the unstoppable love and passion of Christ to bear our sins in His own body on the tree!

Continue to verse 64.

Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself;...”

He has said what? Look back at verse 63c.

“... tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.”

This is the Messiah; God in the flesh. Jesus said, “This is who I am!”

Then Jesus adds, in verse 64,

“... 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.”

Jesus says, “Not only am I the Son of God – the anointed Messiah – but He takes a phrase out of Daniel’s prophecy, which records that “the Lord will return in the clouds of heaven” (Daniel 7:13), and applies it to Himself.

He says, “*I am the One* who has the right hand of divine authority – I will speak and when I do, you will be hearing the authoritative voice of God Himself.”

Before the Sanhedrin, our Lord says, “I am going to come again and judge the world as God Incarnate.”

Do you know what Jesus was doing when He finally spoke? He was giving them all the information they wanted and needed to condemn Him for blasphemy.

These men tore their clothes and took a unanimous vote calling for His death.

Let me now briefly refer to a fifth law that the Sanhedrin will violate.

5. Law #5 – The death penalty was to be determined only after a day of fasting.

Jewish records reveal that none of the seventy-one members of the Sanhedrin would eat or drink anything during a trial. This symbolized that the Supreme Court would be agonizing over the future of a man condemned to die.

However, for this Sanhedrin, the verdict is immediate. The high priest called for a vote and, as Matthew 26:66 records, they all voted without hesitation,

... *“He deserves death!”*

6. Law #6 – A unanimous vote by the court would allow the accused to go free.

A unanimous vote is our Western procedure, but the Jewish custom was that a unanimous vote implied the lack of critical thinking. The rabbis taught that if the court voted unanimously in condemning someone to death, then there was an obvious lack of mercy. So a unanimous vote of the Sanhedrin immediately allowed the prisoner to go free.

This was not the case for Jesus. Look at what actually happened next, according to verses 67-68.

Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him,

and said “Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?”

Mark adds,

... [they] blindfolded Him and ... beat Him with their fists ... (Mark 14:65)

Can you imagine the Supreme Court of the United States condemning a criminal to die, and then, robes and all, descending upon the accused and spitting in his face, blindfolding him, and with bitter anger and hatred, punching him with their fists?

The Supreme Court of Israel degenerated into a crude, vicious mob of seventy-one men – spitting, hitting, cursing, and mocking.

Who were the real blasphemers this day? Who were the accused before God? The Sanhedrin and the nation they represented.

Oh, and everyone since who has ever heard the gospel of Christ and refused to worship Him.

Conclusion

Can you hear this Prisoner today? Did you know He died for you?

Do you understand that this Lamb, innocent and pure, is being tried before Israel’s high court so that you and I will never have to be tried before the court of heaven? He is condemned to die by man’s injustice so that you and I will never be condemned to die by God’s justice.

He faced the anger and wrath of mankind so that all who believe in Him will never experience the wrath of a righteous God.

This is what Jesus did for you. And the question remains: “Will you reject Him, as they did, or will you give your life to Him?”

Will you give your life to this sinless, pure, righteous, merciful, unblemished, suffering, dying, resurrecting, ascending, coming Lamb of God?