

"The Trial of Jesus Christ"
John 18:12-14, 19-24 • Matthew 26:57-68
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Overview of the trial of Christ

1. Arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:1-11)
2. Jewish trial before the High Priest and the Sanhedrin
 - (1) Preliminary hearing before Annas (John 18:19-23)
 - (2) Trial before Caiaphas (Matthew 26:57-68)
 - (3) Confirmation of guilt at daybreak by Sanhedrin (Luke 22:66-71)
3. Roman trial before Pontius Pilate
 - (1) First appearance before Pilate (Luke 23:1-5; John 18:28-38)
 - (2) Appearance before Herod (Luke 23:6-12)
 - (3) Trial before Pilate (Matt. 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:13-25; John 19:1-16)
4. Crucifixion

Did you realize that of the 21 chapters in the Gospel of John, the first twelve cover 33 years of the life of Christ, but the last nine chapters deal with just six days. Why is it that John would spend 43% of his book (nine chapters) dealing with just six days of Christ's life? Because in that final week Jesus fulfilled his purpose for coming into this world, to suffer and die for our sins so that we might have life through him. We traditionally call those final days, "Passion Week." Others have called them "the week that changed the world." Last Sunday we looked at the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on Thursday evening of that final week. Today we come to his trial before Caiaphas the high priest and the Jewish Sanhedrin.

Jesus actually had two trials: one was a religious trial, the other a civil trial. The religious trial was before Caiaphas the high priest, the civil trial was before Pontius Pilate the Roman governor. The reason for two trials was that Judea was under Roman rule at that time. Judea was part of the Roman province of Syria. The Romans allowed the Sanhedrin to try all religious issues and punish offenders. But if the sentence was death, the case had to be brought before the governor for a retrial. The Jews were not allowed to execute the death penalty. So in the trial of Jesus, although condemned to death by the Jews, he had to be retried before Pilate in order for the sentence to be carried out.

I. THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE TRIAL (John 18: 13-23; Matthew 26:57-58)

John mentions that after arresting Jesus and binding him they brought him before Annas the father-in-law of Caiaphas. This is mentioned in John 18:12: *"Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year."*

Annas was an old man now. He had been high priest twenty years before from 6AD to 15AD. According to Jewish law the high priesthood was for life, but the Romans had deposed him; but he remained the power behind the scenes, and arranged for five of his sons to succeed him as high priests. The high priest at this time was his son-in-law Caiaphas.

This entire appearance before Annas was illegal for several reasons:

- **FIRST:** It was at night, between 11-12 O'clock. According to rules of Hebrew criminal procedure relating to capital crimes, no trial or any part of it, including the arrest, could take place at night. The Mishnah said, "Let a capital offense be tried during the day, but suspend it at night."
- **SECOND:** It was before a single judge. The Mishnah says, "Be not a sole judge, for there is no sole judge but one."
- **THIRD:** An accused person was never to be compelled to testify against himself. Under Western law is common for a team of detectives to examine a prisoner about the charges against him. Then he is brought before an examining magistrate to determine whether there is enough evidence to hold him over for trial. But under Hebrew law this kind of examination of an accused person was forbidden. So when Annas questioned him, it says, Jesus replied... ***"Why question me? Ask those how heard me. Surely they know what I said"*** (18:21). He was within his rights when he refused to answer. Annas assumed there was nothing more he could do so he sent the prisoner to Caiaphas (24).

This is where we turn to the Matthew account. Matthew 26: 57: ***"Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled."*** This was the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Israel, the only court authorized to sit for crimes punishable by death. It had 71 members organized into three chambers: 23 priests, 23 scribes, 23 elders, plus two presiding officers. Jesus refers to them in Matthew 16:21: ***"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."*** For a trial, at least 23 members had to be present.

It is impossible to understand this trial apart from at least a basic knowledge of Hebrew law and legal practice. Many able scholars have sifted through the Mishnah and have summarized the Laws of the Sanhedrin regarding trials. In the sermon notes I have listed some of those laws:

1. There was to be no arrest accomplished by a bribe.
2. All criminal cases had to be tried in the daytime.
3. There could be no secret trials, only public.
4. Sanhedrin trials could only take place in the Hall of Judgement in the temple compound. No decision was valid which did not take place there.
5. All evidence had to be guaranteed by two or three witnesses whose testimony had to agree in every detail or the prisoner was discharged immediately.

6. The witnesses were the accusers who had seen the crime, arranged for the arrest and presented the accusation before the judges.
7. A false witness was put to death.
8. Before a trial could begin there must be a presentation of the accusation by the witnesses (indictment) then arrest and trial.
9. At the trial the defense had to come first.
10. The judges were never to seek to condemn the accused. They were to take his side and seek every means for his acquittal.
11. The accused person never to be allowed to testify against himself.
12. A person could never be condemned on the basis of his own words alone.
13. In cases of capital punishment, the trial and the guilty verdict cannot occur at the same time but must be separated by 24 hours.
14. The verdict must be announced in the daytime.
15. After hearing the testimony of the witnesses, they must vote individually beginning with the youngest so they would not be influenced by the elders.
16. A unanimous decision for guilt shows innocence since it is impossible for 23 to 71 men to agree without plotting.
17. The judges were to be humane and kind.
18. The condemned person was not to be beaten or scourged beforehand.

"The law was broken so many times in the trial of Jesus that it is hard to see how a trial could have been more illegally run or the laws of Israel more thoroughly flouted." James Boice

II. THE PURPOSE OF THE TRIAL (59-62)

The Jewish religious leaders had already determined to kill him (John 11:49-52), so this was really just a kangaroo court. They were now just trying to find some excuse for putting him to death. Let's notice the steps the Sanhedrin followed in attempting to accomplish their purpose.

1. Matthew 26:59: ***"The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death."*** Remember Jewish law required an indictment, then the arrest. The witnesses were the ones who had to take the initiative in bringing the indictment. All of this was to be done in the daylight not at night. And the court could only meet in the Hall of Judgement in the Temple. So Jesus was (1) illegally arrested, (2) unindicted, (3) standing before the Sanhedrin at an illegal hour (at night) in an illegal place (not in the Hall of Judgement but in the house of the high priest).
2. Verse 60 says they did not find false evidence...***"though many false witnesses came forward."***
3. Finally two came forward (61) ***"and declared, 'This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.' "*** Even this testimony had to be rejected (Mark 14:59). We are not told why this testimony was overthrown. Maybe the

witnesses could not agree on the exact place these words were spoken or when they were spoken. But for whatever reason the testimony did not stand.

4. In verses 62-63 we read: ***"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."***

By this time Caiaphas must have been seething with anger and frustration. They had Jesus in their power but they couldn't find anything to charge him with. It now appeared that because of the lack of an indictment or any testimony against him they would have to adjourn their meeting and let Jesus go.

But then Caiaphas had a stroke of genius! He saw the case dissolving before his eyes. So he abruptly turned to interrogate the prisoner Himself. Remember this was totally illegal. The person charged with a capital crime was never to testify against himself. And the high priest was not allowed to express an opinion or interrogate the accused. He was to keep silent.

This action by Caiaphas brings us to...

III. THE CLIMAX OF THE TRIAL (63-68)

The QUESTION (63): ***"I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."***

- If Caiaphas had merely asked Jesus ***"Tell us if you are the Christ,"*** He could have answered YES without jeopardy. It was not a capital crime to claim to be the Messiah. There were a lot of guys running around claiming to be the messiah.
- Or if Caiaphas had merely asked Jesus if he was the Son of God, Jesus could also have answered YES, without danger. Because all Jews had a right to be called sons of God (John 10:33-36).
- But by combining the two, Caiaphas was asking in effect, not whether Jesus was a mere human messiah or else a son of God in a general Jewish sense, but whether he was the divine Messiah.

This was a crucial moment.

- If Jesus says **NO**, then there are no charges against him
- If he says **YES**, then he is signing his own death warrant

The ANSWER (64): ***"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*** Under oath he swears that he is indeed the divine Messiah. This was a clear and positive declaration of both His Messiahship and His Deity as the Eternal Son of God. He appeared there before them in humiliation; but he warned them that he was coming back in power and glory as THEIR judge (Daniel 7:13).

Caiaphas had two choices. One was to acknowledge that Jesus spoke the truth, and fall down and worship Him as Messiah. The other was to reject Him as a blasphemer and put Him to death. Caiaphas and the rest of them chose the second option. They did not choose wisely. They rejected all the evidence and refused to listen to his claims.

Ignoring the admonition of the OT law that prohibited a priest from tearing his garments, in verse 65 it 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?"***

The VERDICT (66): And they all said in unison, ***"He is worthy of death."***

- They ignored the law that 24 hours must elapse between the trial and the verdict.
- They ignored the law that said they had to vote in order and that the high priest must vote last so that his vote would not sway the others.
- And they demonstrated the truthfulness of the law that said, "a unanimous decision for guilt shows innocence since it is impossible for 23 to 71 men to agree without plotting."

Once they had shouted their illegal verdict, repudiating all reverence for God and His laws, they even lost common human decency...

The ABUSE (67-68): ***"Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ, Who hit you?"*** The law said judges were to be humane and kind and a person condemned to death was not to be beaten or scourged beforehand. But contrary to all Jewish and even Roman law they took it on themselves to begin to beat him.

Now we see the hearts of these men who pretended to try Jesus. These supreme judges of the nation showed their real inner nature and their deep, intense hatred for Jesus---as they spit on him, and beat him, and slapped him in the face. This is what they think of the Son of God. Under Jewish law, it was one of the highest of indignities to be slapped or spit upon. The penalty for slapping was 200 denarii; for spitting-400 denarii.

Matthew 27:1 says, ***"Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death."*** By this second meeting of the Sanhedrin after daylight they were trying to give this disgraceful travesty of justice a semblance of legality, since you remember that trials for capital crimes had to take place in the day time. Then, ***"They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor."***

IV. APPLICATION

Now let's ask ourselves the question: "So what?" How does all of this apply to us?

FIRST, the trial of Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin shows us the true nature of the hearts of men and women.

We tend to think that our own natures are essentially good. But that is not what the Bible reveals about us. Jeremiah 17:9 says, ***"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."*** This does not mean we are all as evil as we could possibly be. But given enough time and the right set of circumstances, we could all be a lot worse. It

means that the roots of the most heinous crimes ever perpetrated in the history of the world are within us!

I mowed my lawn about a week ago. If you looked at it today, it looks fairly nice. But it is not nice! There are some of the UGLIEST weeds you can imagine in my yard. You can't see them now; they have been cut down to the level of the grass. But give them time and you will see them again. They were so UGLY I was literally afraid to touch them. Those weeds are like the root of sin that lurks in our hearts. In Mark 7 Jesus spoke of some of the things that come out of our sinful natures: *"For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'"* (Mark 7:20-23). The Apostle Paul wrote, *"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."* (Galatians 5:19-22). Given the right situation and the power, each of us has the potential to do exactly as Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin did. We shouldn't look at others and say in our supposed superior righteousness: "How horrible." Instead we should say, "There but for the grace of God, go I." The Bible says the only way to overcome that old sin nature is to receive a NEW NATURE. Jesus called that being born again. When we place our trust in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, we are born again and receive a NEW NATURE. The Spirit of God comes to dwell in our hearts. When the Spirit of God is in control, the fruit of the Spirit begins to be revealed in our lives: *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23).

SECOND, the trial of Jesus also reminds us of his claims and promises.

In this passage, Jesus claimed to be God. He claimed that he would rise from the dead in three days. He claimed that he would return to the earth as the judge. The official leaders of the nation of Israel rejected His claims. They responded by saying, "He speaks blasphemies." Alexander McClaren has written: "The ruined temple and nineteen centuries of wandering misery shows what comes to men who hear Christ declaring he is the Son of the Living God and the Judge of the world and find nothing in it but blasphemy."

If the claims of Jesus Christ are true, then we must bow in love and submission to Him. The Sanhedrin refused to hear his defense that day. But people today are even more guilty than the Sanhedrin if they refuse to listen to Christ's claims. They are guiltier because we have the greatest of all evidences of the truthfulness of Christ's claims--the resurrection. And we have the whole New Testament. Yet millions of people today reject Christ, without even bothering to investigate his claims. They are not wise. Because if Jesus is who he claimed to be, what we do with Him is a matter of life and death.

As we close I want to ask you the most important question you could ever be asked or ever answer: "Have you received Christ personally?" John 1:11-12: ***"He came unto his own and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them he gave the power to become children of God, even to those who believed on his name."*** Receive Him today as your Savior!

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