

God in the Dock

Matthew 26:57-75

Before Jesus goes to the cross, He takes the stand in front of the Sanhedrin who falsely accuse in order to execute Him. The whole setup violates the standards of justice in Israel, reveals the depths of our enmity with God, and displays the unconquerable love of our Savior.

Summary of the Text

The soldiers who apprehended Jesus bring Him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and elders are already assembled (v. 57). Peter follows from a distance to see what the end will be (v. 58). Even though they want false witnesses and have many volunteers, none can agree until finally two come forward and say Jesus claimed He would destroy the temple and build it again in three days (vv. 59-61). Jesus says nothing, so Caiaphas puts Him under oath to tell the truth about whether He is the Messiah (vv. 62-63). Jesus calls and raises, saying he would see Son of Man sitting at God's right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven. This gives more than Caiaphas needs to accuse Him of blasphemy and reach an agreement from the court that He ought to die (vv. 64-66). They then spit on, beat, strike with open palms, and mock Him to prophesy about who took the cheap shots (vv. 67-68). Meanwhile, outside in the courtyard, a servant girl asks Peter if he was with Jesus, and he denies it (vv. 69-70). Having gone out of the gateway, another girl asks and he swears an oath that he doesn't know the man (vv. 71-72). Later, a group approaches and says his accent gives him away, but he curses and swears that he doesn't know Jesus (vv. 73-74). Just then the rooster crows, reminding Peter that Jesus said he would deny Him three times. He goes out and weeps bitterly (v. 75).

Kangaroo Court

The entire setup, trial, and conviction of Jesus is a travesty of justice. The Sanhedrin consists of seventy priests and elders, and it functions as the supreme court of God's chosen nation. You don't have to know anything about criminal procedures to understand that charges must be leveled before someone is taken into custody. Jesus says they treat Him like a robber all of a sudden but did nothing when He taught openly in the temple (v. 55). Having seized Him, they try to get false witnesses to agree so they can execute Him, revealing wicked and illegal motives. The whole thing happens at night when no capital crime was allowed to be tried. In addition, it's the eve of Passover, and the law didn't allow a trial for life to begin during a festival. A bribe to Judas initiated the arrest, which even the chief priests recognize as blood money (27:6). Finally, they get two false witnesses to agree, but the charge is a joke: "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days'" (v. 61). It's so absurd that Jesus doesn't dignify it with an answer (v. 62). The closest He thing said to this was after cleansing the temple the first time, when the Jews asked for a sign: "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up'" (Jn. 2:19). He was talking about the temple of His body, and He never took action to tear down the physical structure. The high priest complains about His lack of response, and His silence fulfills Isaiah's prophecy: "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth" (Is. 53:7). Under oath He answers that He is the Messiah and more, which the court condemns as blasphemy and deserving of death (v. 66). These solemn judges then spit in His face and beat Him, confirming He is the suffering servant: "I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting" (Is. 50:6). Matthew shows that not only do the leaders of Israel

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do injustice, they condemn justice itself. They condemn Yahweh for being Yahweh. This is what the proceedings were designed to do because this is what the human heart, alienated from God, does. We blame Him for our unbelief. We cite circumstances as the real reason for our sin. We put onto others the guilt that belongs to us. It works out well in our minds as we are judge, jury, and executioner, trying to forget who God is and that we still stand before Him to give an account.

Upping the Ante

When facing hard circumstances and crises, it's easy to set the truth aside in resignation or despair. Jesus does the opposite. He won't dignify false charges, answering a fool according to his folly. Instead He gives the Sanhedrin something much bigger to lose their minds over: "It is as you said. 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" (v. 64). He quotes Daniel 7:13 to say He is *the* Son of Man, the one who will be "given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:14). This is why Caiaphas tears his robe, which is unlawful for a high priest to do (v. 65; Lev. 21:10). Nothing Jesus can say will change the course of the court, and yet He causes the high priest to ceremonially disqualify himself from office. Why? Because Jesus is not afraid of the truth, and in fact wants it exposed even though it will bring Him pain. This becomes an anti-Passover. Instead of looking to God to pass over their sins and spare from death, the council prepares to spill the Lord's blood and bring judgment upon themselves. It's not Jesus who deserves death, but them. God lets us come to end of ourselves so that we can see the greatness of His love and our desperate need for it. The more ungodly the priests and elders become, the more the righteousness of Jesus stands out. The old Adam spirals into sin and death while the new one, the Son Man, prepares to secure eternal life. In Christ we need not and must not be afraid of the truth.

Why Peter?

Next to this trial stands the trial of Peter. He already forsook and fled (v. 56), but now he's back which took some courage. How little remained is revealed by his answers to the servant girls' questions. Others who have walked on water would have done better here, and that's the point. Peter is the rock, the leader among the apostles who are the foundation of the church (Matt. 16:18). This is the best of us who are following God but not relying on the Spirit. It's only by grace that we can standfast. In our own strength, and convinced of it, we can't even stay up an hour. Peter weeps bitterly in godly sorrow, the kind that led to the repentance we see after Jesus rose from the dead. Peter will be fully restored. The early Christians reading this would learn and remember that Peter was not always the giant they knew him to be. He too had to be brought to the end of himself so that he would know the depth of forgiveness and walk humbly in Christ. Jesus predicted his betrayal to do this as well. You will commit egregious sin—like murder and adultery in your heart. If you weep bitterly, then there is nothing but mercy and hope. God knew it would happen and calls you back.