

“24 Hours That Changed the World”

Part 3 - The Trial Before the Jews

Mark 14:53-61

March 22, 2009

Annas and Caiaphas finally had Jesus right where they wanted Him. For years He had frustrated them. He challenged their understanding of the faith. He disrupted the way they operated. They were just trying to maintain the system in which they had been brought up, the Jewish faith as they had been taught it all their lives. And then this uneducated carpenter from Galilee comes from out of no where to tell them, the educated elite that they were doing it all wrong. That they didn't understand. That God had something else in mind than what they thought. They didn't have to put up with that. After all, they were the ones who had been blessed by God. They must have been righteous because God had put them in charge. They were the Sanhedrin. But what was the Sanhedrin anyway?

The concept of the Sanhedrin goes back in history to the days of Moses, when he appointed seventy elders to help govern the children of Israel. After being forgotten for about 700 years, Ezra brought the group together again after the exile in Babylon. So the Sanhedrin was a group of 71 men, headed by the high priest, who had responsibilities over the people of faith. Sometimes their power was greater than others. During the reign of Herod the Great, Herod was quite jealous of these aristocratic priests, so he did what he could to take them down. He began a bloody assault against the leaders of the Sanhedrin. And he changed the rules of membership so that he could control them, rather than allowing the religious leaders to challenge the political leader.

As a result of the actions of Herod, the Sanhedrin became quite a corrupt organization where the high priest became a political appointment rather than an elevation of the faithful. In the days of Jesus, the Sanhedrin was controlled by a man name Annas, who at one time was himself the high priest. But after his reign he still controlled the group by making his cronies the ones in charge. When Jesus came before the Sanhedrin, Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas, held the position.

Now traditionally the Sanhedrin was restricted by the teachings of the scriptures. If someone brought religious charges against a Jew, it was the Sanhedrin that held the hearings. They were also the group who would bring the final judgment. Again, there were rules. But this group in control was more concerned about doing what they wanted to do rather than doing what was right. And so they played by their own rules. What were the rules of the Sanhedrin?

Well their laws said that the Sanhedrin could only meet in the Hall of Hewn Stone in the Temple, giving the impression that the grace of God needed to be on display. But Jesus was tried in the home of the high priest. It was a home court advantage that gave all sorts of power

to Caiaphas. The law said that trial could only be held during the day, in the light of the day so that everything would be out in the open; everything on public display. But Jesus was tried in the middle of the night. Not even all the members of the Sanhedrin knew about it. After all, they wouldn't want members like Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea to hold them accountable to their own rules. They couldn't take the chance that someone might even try to defend this Jesus. Among the rules of trial was the prohibition against trying criminal cases during the Passover festival. This was to be a time to remember the mighty acts of God. But this group was more interested in their own power and might, and so Jesus was tried during the Passover festival.

The violation of their own rules did not end there. As a matter of scripture, it was understood that all evidence had to be verified by two witnesses. And it was not just two witnesses, but two who did not know one another so there could be no collaboration or conspiracy. And those two witnesses had to be interviewed separately. But when they tried to go by that, they couldn't get two witnesses to agree, even though they did conspire and lie against Him. And so, Jesus was tried only on His own words. No other evidence was accepted or considered. Even though the law said that the death penalty could not be based solely on the testimony of the accused, still it was only the testimony of Jesus that was received.

Finally the rules for trial explicitly stated that judgment could not be announced on the same day as the trial unless the verdict was '>Not Guilty'. This was done so that members and jurors would have a night to consider their actions. It gave them time to change their mind. But the judgment of Jesus was pronounced on the spot. There was no time to reconsider anything, because the verdict had been determined before the trial ever began. All in all, the whole system by which the Sanhedrin was to operate was designed for maximum mercy. However, during the trial of Jesus, mercy was never a possibility.

Now you might wonder why a trial should be held at all. If we are not looking for truth or justice, why go to all the bother of a trial? Because they needed to come up with a charge. That was all. The purpose of the trial was simply to create the charge which could then be used to convict Jesus and have Him executed. Understand that most of the common folk liked Jesus. He was a good story teller, and if these stories about His healing power had any validity, He was a great person to have around. They weren't sure about any of that Amessiah" talk, but still they thought He was a pretty good guy. If the Sanhedrin had killed Him just to get Him out of the way, all those common folk might get upset. And if they raised any sort of fuss before Pilate or even Herod, there might be some pretty severe consequences. Annas and Caiaphas didn't want to take that chance. And so they held a trial, more like a grand jury where possibilities could be sought, and charges brought, so they could legally put Jesus to death. It took a while to come up with anything. It is said in this country that a good district attorney

can find a way to indict a ham sandwich. But Jesus was no ham sandwich. And even though the deck was stacked against Him, they could not get two witnesses to agree on the same lies. The first charge they came up with was that Jesus said He would destroy and then rebuild the temple in three days. It was a complete misunderstanding of what Jesus had said. He was talking about the temple that is His body, but the truth did not matter. It was the goal of stopping Him, of killing Him that mattered, even if they had to lie to get it done. But when Jesus was asked about it, He didn't say anything. And without His testimony, they could prove nothing. The charge was baseless and everyone knew it. They had to find another way, another charge to use to prosecute and persecute Jesus.

Then came that question: “Are You the Messiah?” Why would Caiaphas immediately jump to that conclusion, that Jesus thought Himself to be the messiah. Jesus did think that, of course. Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought He was, and Peter was the first to answer correctly, that Jesus is the One about whom the prophets spoke. But Jesus told them that they were not to share that information with anyone until after His death and resurrection. But it seems that someone did talk about it. I believe that Judas not only told them where Jesus could be found, he not only pointed Him out to the mob by greeting Him with a kiss, Judas also gave Annas and Caiaphas the charge that could be used, the charge that would be used to convict Jesus. And so Caiaphas asked, “Are you the Christ?”

Now understand that Jesus had a choice. There could be no conviction without His testimony. Just like the first charge disappeared when Jesus refused to answer, so would this charge. But even beyond that, even if Jesus did answer, He still had the opportunity to save Himself. Understand His choice. Jesus could say “No”, and if He did, it was all over. But if Jesus said “Yes, it is true, I am the Messiah, the Christ,” only then would it lead to the cross. How many of us would answer truthfully, or even answer at all if we understood what was truly at stake? Would it be freedom or crucifixion?

In His answer to the high priest, Jesus remembered Daniel who wrote, *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."* (Daniel 7:13-14) [Then] *Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."* (Mark 14:62) In His answer, He was saying that the prophecy of Daniel and of all the prophets was written about Him. Jesus told the truth, and in the process, He sealed His fate. For Jesus was then charged with claiming to be the Messiah. And the leaders in the Temple convicted Him; they had Him killed because they refused to accept Him.

During the trial of Jesus, before some members of the Sanhedrin, all we see from those Jewish leaders is hatred on display. That’s what it was all about. Hatred. Last week I talked about how Judas knew that no one gives up power without a fight. And Judas believed that so much, that he went to those in power, and handed over to them the weapons they needed to destroy Jesus. They were not going to allow this hick from the sticks, this carpenter from Galilee to ruin their sweet setup. They were in power, they had the power, and energized by their hatred, they were going to keep it.

And then we look to Jesus, who would seem to be completely vulnerable before this group of adversaries. But there was no fear or worry in Him. In Jesus we see courage and confidence. We see His courage because He knew that if He were to honestly answer that question from Caiaphas, “Are you the Christ?” He would die a most painful and messy death. And yet He answered without hesitation. And we also see His confidence because even though there was no longer any doubt that He would be nailed to a cross and hung up to die, still, even to the end, He spoke of His ultimate triumph.

On the cross, Jesus cried out, saying, “*My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46) Many who were present on that day, and even many who are around today believe that this was a cry of frustration, of Jesus recognizing that He had been totally abandoned. And He had been abandoned by Judas and then the rest of the disciples. He was abandoned by the supposed justice of the Sanhedrin and later abandoned by the law of the Romans. But He was never abandoned by God. For this was not a cry of frustration, but a call of confidence in His ultimate triumph. Jesus was quoting the 22nd Psalm, which begins with those words, “*My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?*” But later we read, “*For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.*” (Psalm 22:24) And the psalm ends with the words, “*Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn for he has done it.*” (Psalm 22:30-31)

Jesus was confident of Himself, His mission, and the faithfulness of His Lord. He knew who He was and whose He was. But what about you? Because in truth, Jesus was not only on trial before the Sanhedrin 2000 years ago, He is on trial before every human every day. Do you believe the testimony that Jesus gave, that He is the Messiah? Because the answer to that is as important to you now as it was to Jesus 2000 years ago. The consequences are the same. If you say ‘No’, God will leave you alone and it will all be over. But if you say, ‘Yes’, it will mean your life. But the question is always before you. The question is yours to answer. Who is Jesus of Nazareth? May you answer with grace. May you answer in faith. May you answer by giving your life to Him, today and everyday. And in your life, may it be so. Amen.