

JESUS ON TRIAL

SERIES: THE FINAL HOURS



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Matthew 26:57-68
Third Message
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I first met Vasek when we were both 17 years old. I was a junior in high school on a mission trip to the Czech Republic. Vasek was a Czech high school student who was attending the English camp that our team was putting on.

Throughout the week, our goal was to share the love of Christ with Vasek and the other students who were there. We had the joy of seeing several students come to Christ that week. Vasek was not one of them. In fact, from the first day of the camp, we were all fairly certain that Vasek would not be one of them.

During the evening sessions, Vasek and a few of his friends would sit in the back, talking with each other and ignoring most everything that was being shared. He made it pretty clear that he was not interested in Jesus, God, or the Bible. And that didn't change throughout the week.

The next summer, Vasek came to the U.S. to visit our church. During this visit, it became clear that something was changing in Vasek. His ambivalence towards Christianity had turned into a skeptical curiosity. What did the Bible really teach about Jesus? Did he actually rise from the dead? Did those miracles really happen? Could there possibly be something to this Christianity thing?

During this time of curiosity, Vasek was, in a sense, putting Jesus on trial. He was evaluating Jesus, trying to determine what he thought about him.

We all do this, don't we? We put Jesus on trial. It looks different for each of us, but at some time or in some way we have all put Jesus on trial.

For some of us, it happened in high school. We had grown up in a Christian home. We had gone to church all our lives. We had heard all the Bible stories, and sung "Jesus Loves Me" a thousand times. Then one day we realized that our faith had just been handed down to us from our parents. We didn't really know if we believed all of this. So, we put Jesus on trial to see what we really thought of him.

For others of us, it happened in college. We hadn't had anything to do with Jesus before we showed up on campus our freshman year. At some point along the way, someone invited us to a Bible study in their dorm room. We showed up because there was free food, and we were intrigued by what we heard. So, we started exploring what was being taught. And we put Jesus on trial.

Putting Jesus on trial is not something that we do only once. This is something that we do over and over and over again. When we experience tragedy and loss, we re-evaluate Jesus to see if we can still trust him. When we make major life decisions (whether to take a new job, make a big move, start a new relationship, end a hard marriage), we re-evaluate Jesus to see what kind of impact he will have on those decisions. We put Jesus on trial all the time.

In our passage today, Jesus is on trial before the Jewish leaders. This is the third week in our Lenten series called *The Final Hours*, and the hours are slipping away. Jesus has already shared the Last Supper with his disciples. He has gone out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He's been arrested late at night. And that is where our passage begins.

Matthew 26:57-60:

Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. 58 And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. 59 Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, 60 but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward.

Suits. Boston Legal. The Practice. Law and Order. Law and Order: Criminal Intent. Law and Order: Trial by Jury. Law and Order: LA. Law and Order: Special Victims Unit. There have been many legal dramas that have entertained American audiences over the last 20 years.

One of these legal dramas currently being aired is called *How to Get Away with Murder*. This series features law professor and criminal defense attorney Annalise Keating. Keating is known for being an excellent defense attorney and is hired to defend cases that seem impossible to win.

Throughout the series, Keating makes one thing clear to her students at the law school at which she teaches: we are not trying to determine whether our client is guilty or innocent. That is not our job. Our job is to win the case. Our job is to convince the jury that our client is innocent.¹

Keating and her team are not after justice. They are after victory.

Such is the case with Jesus' trial before the Jewish leaders. The leaders are not after a fair trial. They are not concerned with justice. They are seeking false testimony so that they might put Jesus to death. They had determined the outcome of the trial before it ever began.

According to Jewish law, this "trial" is hardly a trial at all. It breaks numerous Jewish laws and customs. Here is the short list:

- When Jesus was arrested, he was not formally charged with any crimes.
- This trial before Caiaphas takes place in the middle of the night (Jesus was arrested in the garden earlier in chapter 26, and before morning comes 27:1).
- The trial takes place the day before the Sabbath.
- The Jews are intentionally looking for false witnesses.
- During the trial, Jesus is not given any opportunity to call a witness to his defense.

All of these things were specifically forbidden under Jewish legal code. But the Jewish leaders were not concerned with what was legal and what was not. They were concerned with only one thing: seeing to it that Jesus was put to death.

Why were the Jewish leaders so adamant that Jesus is killed?

If you could have surveyed the Jewish leaders as to why they wanted Jesus to be killed, I think they would have given different answers depending on their political and religious party.

This counsel that Jesus stood before was the Jewish Sanhedrin—the highest counsel of the Jews—and it was made up of Sadducees and Pharisees, along with a few others.

The Sadducees wanted Jesus dead because they were afraid that Jesus was going to start an uprising against the Romans. The Sadducees were conservative, wealthy aristocrats who were friendly with the Romans. The Jewish high priest—Caiaphas at this time—was always a Sadducee who was put in place by the Romans, and the Romans could replace him any time they wanted. The Sadducees didn't want to risk losing their power by upsetting the Romans, so they certainly didn't want Jesus to restart a Jewish revolt.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were hoping that Jesus would start a revolt. The Pharisees were not wealthy aristocracy who were entrenched with the Romans. Rather, they were much more "of the people," holding an incredible amount of influence over the Jewish masses. The Pharisees hated the fact that they were under Roman rule. They were awaiting the day when God would deliver them from Roman oppression through the hand of the Messiah. When Jesus made it clear that he was not that kind of messiah, they wanted him dead.

What the Sadducees and Pharisees had in common was that they felt threatened by Jesus. Both parties held a significant amount of power or influence, and they could tell that Jesus was threatening that power and influence.

I had the privilege of being in India a few weeks ago with a team from PBC. Scott Grant and I were teaching a group of pastors from northern India, and over the course of our week together we were able to hear many of their stories. We were also able to get a sense of the state of the Gospel in India—northern India in particular. We discovered that many people in India feel very threatened by Jesus.

According to Hindu belief, the place that you were born in society was no coincidence. Rather, it was a direct result of the good or bad things that you have done in your previous lives. Those born into positions of power and authority deserve those positions. Those born into desperate poverty deserve that as well. And those at the bottom of society are consistently reminded that they are without dignity and don't deserve to be respected, loved, or cared for.

But, as these poor and marginalized people hear the Gospel, they learn about a God who loves them and cares for them. They learn that they have dignity

as God's image bearers and that they are deserving of respect. They learn that they don't deserve to be treated like trash and thrown to the curb. Any many of these poor and marginalized people are coming to Christ.

However, those at the top of society—those in positions of power and authority, of wealth and influence—are much more resistant to the Gospel. To them, it is not good news that all people are persons of dignity who are loved by God and deserving of respect. If everyone believed this, that will eventually weaken the power and lessen the influence of those who are at the top.

So, people of power and influence in India tend to feel threatened by the Gospel.

As do people of power and influence in the Silicon Valley, right? Maybe even people with a lot of power and influence in this room.

Jesus asks us to lay down our power and influence at his feet. He doesn't ask us to give it up! At least not necessarily. But he does ask us to surrender that power and influence to him so that we can use these things for his glory rather than for our own. This feels quite threatening to many people.

It is not only people of power and influence, however, who feel threatened by Jesus. Jesus asks us to surrender every part of our lives to him. If we are honest with ourselves, at one time or another we've all asked if following Jesus is worth the cost.

The high school student who doesn't want to be labeled one of "those church kids."

The young couple that doesn't want to give up living together before they get married.

The man who doesn't want to give up his secret addiction to pornography.

The CEO who doesn't want to give up the extra profits that come from compromising her business ethics at just a few points.

We all have things in our life that Jesus wants to come in and change. And that can feel threatening.

But Jesus doesn't come to threaten us. He comes to invite us into life. Real life. Abundant life. Eternal life. He comes to tell us that we are loved. Loved more than we could ever imagine. Loved in the deepest part of our souls. Loved, not because of the best things that we've done, but in spite of the worst things that we have done.

The Jewish leaders didn't understand this idea. They sensed that Jesus was a threat to the things that they held most dearly. And so they determined, before the trial ever began, that Jesus needed to be killed.

After initially having a hard time finding false witnesses to offer convincing testimony against Jesus, finally, two men come forward.

Matthew 26: 60-63:

At last two came forward 61 and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" 62 And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" 63 But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

These two men accuse Jesus of threatening to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Such a threat against the temple would amount to treason in the Jewish context—a capital offense to the Jews.

Did Jesus really make this threat? Not exactly. But he did say something similar.

Just a few chapters earlier, Jesus predicted that the temple would be destroyed, though he never indicated that he would destroy it (Matthew 24:2). Also, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says that if the temple is destroyed, he will rebuild it in three days (John 2:19). John makes it clear, however, this that is a reference to his own body—his death and his resurrection three days later.

So, no, Jesus never threatened to destroy the temple. And yet that is the charge that is brought against him.

How does Jesus respond to his false accusation? Verse 63: "Jesus remained silent."

Why? Why doesn't Jesus defend himself? Why doesn't he respond to this accusation? Why doesn't he set the record straight?

Jesus did not come to defend his life. He came to lay it down, for your sake and mine.

Isaiah 53 is one of the Old Testament passages that most clearly anticipates what Jesus would go through in these last hours of his life. Isaiah 53:7 foreshadows Jesus' silence with sober accuracy:

**He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is
silent,
so he opened not his mouth.**

This image is striking. As a sheep is being led to the slaughter, it remains silent. It doesn't bleat. It doesn't resist. It goes forward in silence.

Why does the sheep go silently towards its own death? Presumably, because it doesn't know where it's headed. If the sheep knew it was being led to its death, you can bet that it would not stay silent. It would bleat and fight and do whatever it could to escape.

Jesus knew exactly where he was headed. Jesus knew that he was headed to the cross. And yet he remained silent. He chose to lay down his life for our sake rather than to defend it.

What an example to those of us who would follow after him 2,000 years later.

What is your default response when someone attacks you? When someone accuses you of saying something that you didn't say or doing something you didn't do? When a coworker tries to destroy your reputation so that they can look good at your expense?

Our first reaction, in many cases, is not to stay silent. It is to defend ourselves. To set the record straight. To insist on justice!

As we read through the Gospel stories, we cannot miss the fact that justice is *very* important to Jesus. He is constantly promoting justice, coming to the aid of the oppressed, defending those who cannot defend themselves. Justice is very important to Jesus. And yet, when it is his life on the line, Jesus remains silent. Jesus chooses not to defend himself.

That is not to say that we are to do the same thing in every case. Jesus didn't defend himself because he was about to defeat sin, death, and Satan and redeem the souls of all who trust in him!

That is not us. There are times when it is good and right to defend ourselves and to fight for justice on our behalf.

The #metoo movement is a great example. If we have been victims of abuse (sexual abuse or otherwise), it is right and good for us to speak up for ourselves as we are ready and able.

Or take the work of International Justice Mission. Their organization is built on the idea that we can't always remain silent. That we have an obligation to speak out and to call evil, evil. And to do something about it. There are children in the Philippines who are being sexually abused online for profit, and we have to do something about it. We have to fight for justice.

But, in cases where we have the opportunity to lay down our lives for the sake of another, we should do it. Sometimes it's right to stay silent. Sometimes it's okay to not defend ourselves. Sometimes we are the lamb that is being led to the slaughter. And we can have the confidence to walk that road knowing that our Savior has walked it before us, and indeed will walk it with us.

Jesus' silence, however, does not continue through the rest of the trial.

Matthew 26:63-64:

And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the Lord the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Here, Caiaphas jumps right to the heart of the matter, the real reason that Jesus was arrested in the first place—namely, that he claimed to be the Messiah. If Caiaphas could get Jesus to admit to such a claim on trial, that would close the case.

Why does Jesus choose to respond here when before he remained silent? There are a few things going on.

One the one hand, Jesus wants to make it clear that he is not about to be crucified for treason or for threatening the temple or for some other made up reason. Rather, he is going to the cross because he claimed to be God's chosen one. He won't go for any other reason.

But more significantly, he responds in such a way that affirms his claim to be the Messiah but clarifies what he means by that. And the way he does that is brilliant.

Look again at Jesus' response in v. 64. "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

In this response, Jesus is alluding to two Old Testament passages that foreshadow the coming of the messiah. The phrases "Son of Man" and "coming on the clouds of heaven" are from Daniel 7:13, and the phrase "seated at the right hand of power" comes from Psalm 110:1.

We aren't going to look in detail at those passages, but let me unpack the significance of why Jesus cites these two references.

Daniel 7:13-14 is a vision of a figure called "the son of man."

This son of man is coming on the clouds of heaven. He comes as he is, into the very presence of God—something that nobody was allowed to do in the Old Testament. Then God gives this son of man authority over every man woman and child. He is given glory. He is given an everlasting kingdom that will never be destroyed.

As Jesus claims the identity as the son of man, he is claiming that, though he may be put to death in this life, he is coming back again one day. And when he comes back, he is coming with power, authority, and the very glory of God himself.

Psalm 110 has some similar themes.

It speaks of the Messiah as a king who will rule over his enemies with the very power and authority of God. This king will execute judgment on his enemies and will establish justice on the earth. So no matter how unjust this trial might be—this mock trial that the Jews are putting Jesus through—in the end, justice will win the day. Judgment will come to those who oppose God.

But the Psalm doesn't stop there. It also identifies this king as a priest forever—one who not only goes into the presence of God himself but one who makes way for us also to be brought into the very presence of God.

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He is saying, "Sure, go ahead and kill me here. Treat me unjustly. Crucify me. But know that I am the Messiah. And no, I am not going to overthrow the Romans now, whether you would like me to or not. But I am coming back one

day. And on that day all authority will be given to me. And I will judge those who oppose me. And I will bring justice to those who are oppressed. And I will usher my people into the very presence of God, where they will enjoy him forever."

Wow! This is what Jesus promises us! He doesn't promise us an easy life now. He doesn't take away our suffering immediately. He doesn't guarantee justice for every victim of violence in this life. He doesn't promise us success in our careers. He doesn't promise us that our children will never stray away. He doesn't promise that our spouse won't get sick and die.

But what he does promise is that he is coming back. And when he does, he will right everything that is wrong in this world. He will heal all of the pain. He will eliminate all wickedness. And most importantly, he will deal with our sin so that we can be in the very presence of God forever.

That's quite the claim! But it's true. Those are the promises that God makes to us. That is the Gospel, my friends.

But the Gospel, the Good News, is only good news to those who are humble enough to accept it. And Caiaphas was not in that place.

Matthew 26:65-68:

Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. 66 What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." 67 Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, 68 saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

Outraged at what he has heard, Caiaphas tears his robes and cries out, "blasphemy!" Nobody could make such a claim if they were not God himself—something that Caiaphas is quite certain is not the case. And so he asks the rest of the Sanhedrin, "What is your judgment?"

In full agreement, they answer, "This man deserves to die." Then they spat in his face. And they struck him. And they mocked him.

As they did these things, their actions proved Jesus' messianic claims to be true in ways that they never realized. Isaiah 53, that beautiful and tragic depiction

of what Jesus would go through for our sake, says this in v. 3-5:

He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
4 Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought
us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, a claim that the Jewish leaders thought was patently false and utterly blasphemous. They mocked and beat him for it. And it was in that mocking and that beating that they proved him to be the very Messiah that he claimed to be.

He was despised and rejected. A man of sorrow and acquainted with grief. Yet it was his chastisement that brought us peace, and his wounds that led to our healing.

Conclusion

Jesus may not be on trial before the Sanhedrin today, but he ends up on trial in the hearts of women and men every day—people evaluating what they think of this man called Jesus.

Some people investigate with care to see if he is who he claims to be.

Others falsely accuse him: If you really loved people, you wouldn't send anyone to hell. If you really were good and powerful, then you wouldn't allow so much evil in the world. If you really cared about me, I wouldn't struggle with depression or addiction or illness.

As people ask Jesus these questions, it often feels as if he stays silent. And so they mock him.

But Jesus has answered these questions. He has answered them, not with words, but with actions. He gave himself up for us. Jesus demonstrated his love for us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

Now, as we learn to imitate this self-giving love, as we learn to give up our lives for the sake of another, we have an opportunity to demonstrate that same love to others who have put Jesus on trial in their own hearts.

Remember Vasek, that high school student from the Czech Republic? The summer he came to visit my church, he started to put Jesus on trial to see what he really believed about him.

Vasek was a very smart and intellectual kid. He had a lot of very serious questions about Christianity that he wanted answers to. So he started exploring.

Two years later, Vasek placed his faith in Christ and was baptized. What happened during those two years? Well, yes, he did find some satisfactory answers to some of the questions that he had. But more significantly, he got connected with a group of people who loved Jesus and regularly laid down their own lives for Vasek and for others in Jesus' name. As Vasek saw this love lived out, he knew the only possible answer was that Jesus really was who he said he was: the Savior of the world.

Today Vasek is a church planter in the Czech Republic. As he goes about this work, he is regularly laying his life down for the lost people of his country so that they too might come to know the love of Christ. Let us all seek to do the same.

EndNotes

¹How to Get Away with Murder. American Broadcasting Company. Program creator: Peter Nowalk. First episode date: Sept 25, 2014.