

Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death,<sup>60</sup> but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward<sup>61</sup> and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'"<sup>62</sup> And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?"<sup>63</sup> 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."<sup>64</sup> 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."<sup>65</sup> 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."<sup>66</sup> What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death."<sup>67</sup> Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him,<sup>68</sup> saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?" (Matt. 26.57-68).

## Introduction

We come today to discuss the "condemnation of Christ in the highest court" as Matthew 26.57-68 presents it to us. What we have in this account are highlights of a profound, an unspeakably profound injustice with Christ on trial. In outline, we will cover two things: the background to the trial and the proceedings of the trial.

### 1A. Background to the trial

#### 1B. Place and time

A crowd of guards and others arrested Jesus in the garden and brought Him to the high priest, Caiaphas. They brought Him to the palace of the high priest as the perspective given in verse 58 indicates ("in the courtyard of the high priest"). It is nighttime (27:1 continues the narrative into the morning) so the Jewish judges could not use the official meeting place at the temple. They convene in great haste (without waiting until the next day) to avoid complications with the multitudes flowing into Jerusalem for the Passover (they are afraid of an "uproar," 26.5).

#### 2B. People

##### 1) Identification of the judges

The judges are the highest officials of the land composed of high priest, chief priests, scribes, and elders (v. 59, the Council is the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish court). This judiciary might be compared to a gathering of the United States Supreme Court with the chief justice presiding, but that comparison fails in a fundamental way because these men are spiritual leaders by God's appointment. Therefore, this is the highest court of any court on earth (cf. Schilder, *Trial*, 99). Of course, something is obviously wrong with meeting for official action in the home of the chief justice, and doing so at night.

This is a religious court composed of spiritual leaders (priests, scribes, and elders), the highest and most trusted representatives of the God of Israel. These men were entrusted with the great task of advancing the cause of justice "based" on God's law: the priests were mediators between God and man in light of the broken law of God, the scribes were instructors in the law of God, and the elders were presbyters commissioned to rule by the law of God.

##### 2) Mention of Peter (26:58)

**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.** He is keeping His oath of allegiance *in a roundabout way* since he follows his teacher *at a distance*. This reminds us of the ministry of Christ to all the disciples. It reminds us of the words of Christ to them regarding His coming suffering and their desertion.

Mentioning Peter here prepares the reader for the account that follows in which Peter denies the Lord three times (26:69-75). But the distance at which Peter follows highlights the fact that "all the disciples left him and fled" (26:56) and it thus stresses the fact Jesus faces His bloodthirsty accusers alone: **Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me** (Jn. 16:32).

### 3B. Goal of those involved

The contradiction of justice evident in the nighttime privacy of the trial is revealed in the goal that motivated the Sanhedrin: to put Him to death with some *appearance* of justice (26:59, **Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death**). They seek a quick verdict so they can then use it to stem the tide of general unrest.

Peter seems to be simply curious: **he sat with the guards to see the end** (26.58). Whatever else may have motivated him is not stated, we are told that he wanted to see the end, to see how things turned out. He is not there to defend the Lord; he is not there to be at His side and give Him support. He is there *anonymously* with the guards at the side of those who arrested Jesus, and who hold Him captive for trial (they remain lest there be any attempt to escape).

## 2A. Proceedings of the trial (we have difficulty, oath, verdict, and aftermath)

### 1B. First, they have difficulty finding condemning evidence

Three things indicate this.

1) It was difficult to secure credible negative testimony against the Lord Jesus even though many false witnesses came forward (**they found none, though many false witnesses came forward**, v. 60). This should not surprise us because we know that He lived a holy life. He went about doing good deeds (Acts 10.38). How could they fault Him for doing the will of God: His food and drink was to do the will of the Father who sent Him? They can find no flaw; there is no blemish to mar His perfection. He is the spotless Lamb of God being led to the slaughter under false pretenses. His life is so profoundly holy that it is difficult to present false charges that look good.

2) Finally they presented concocted and forced evidence. After a difficult process (**At last**, v. 61), they had negative testimony with some surface credibility: **this man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days'** (v. 61). But this was a clear distortion of what Jesus had said. It had nothing but superficial credibility because a) He spoke about *others* destroying the temple that He would rebuild in three days. b) And the temple to which He referred was *His body*, not the building in Jerusalem. Misunderstanding was layered on top of misunderstanding by these false witnesses (cf. Jn. 2:19-22).

3) Finally, the action of the high priest reveals the difficulty of making an honest case against Jesus. In hurried frustration, he departed from "sitting in judgment" to standing up to speak (even today, how often do we see a judge stand while court is in session?). He is disturbed at the fact that they are having trouble making a case against Jesus, and when they finally have testimony from witnesses that agree on a point, Jesus gives no reply. Let us read 60b-63a:

**At last two came forward** <sup>61</sup>and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" <sup>62</sup>And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" <sup>63</sup>But Jesus remained silent.

Apparently the high priest is seeking to have the charges dignified by some kind of reply. But Jesus does not defend Himself nor does He seek to clarify the statements about the temple. He does not seek to justify Himself. He does not even try to clarify or explain. Instead, He entrusted Himself to **him who judges justly**. Peter's words written later are fitting to quote here:

**He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.** <sup>23</sup>When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup>He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed (1 Pet. 2:22-24).

This silence remains despite the insistence of the high priest: **Have you no answer ...But Jesus remained silent**, as Isaiah had prophesied:

**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... there was no deceit in his mouth...when his soul makes an offering for sin** (Isa. 53:7-10).

### 2B. Second, in the proceedings, there is a solemn oath

Now, the frustrated high priest drops the subject raised by the two false witnesses. He then put Jesus under a formal oath **by the living God** to speak and tell the truth as to whether or not He thought of Himself as **the Christ, the Son of God** (v. 63). This is a last ditch effort to get Jesus to

testify against Himself; no evidence brought against Him could be made to stick; they hated Him without a cause (Jn. 15.25). He was oppressed and afflicted for righteous-doing not for wrong-doing.

At this point in the trial, Jesus speaks up (v. 64). This is not a reply to the accusers, nor is it a response to the injustice of the proceedings. It is a straightforward self-disclosure and a prophecy. We can now comment on each of these things.

1) First, Jesus spoke in a somewhat veiled way: **you have said so** (26.64a). For this reply, the Gospel of Mark reports that Jesus said, "I am." All silence and all secrecy about His special and unique relationship to the Father in heaven is now set aside. Under oath, before the highest court in the land, "indeed, before all human history" (Ridderbos, 503), Jesus declared, "Yes, you have said it, yes I am the Messiah and I am the Son of God."

2) Next, and most powerfully, Jesus not only said "I am the Son of God" but He also said "I am the Son of Man.": **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"** (26.64). What makes this so astounding is that it is not just a reference to His true human nature (a son of man) but a reference to the fact that as a man He is *the* Son of Man spoken of in the book of Daniel, the one to whom God will give universal sovereignty (Dan. 7:14). This is an important OT text:

**As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. 10 A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened...13I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 And to him was 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 one that shall not be destroyed (Dan. 7:9-10; 13--15).**

By identifying Himself with *the* Son of Man of Daniel, Jesus directs our thoughts to the glory that will follow this present humiliation. They are in the process of condemning Him to death on the cross, but God will raise Him from the dead on the third day. Beyond the cross is the resurrection and ascension to the throne in heaven. Jesus is universal sovereign and Sabbath king. They judge Him in a grave injustice; He will judge them at His coming with perfect justice. He is the universal Judge of the world! He tells them this is the case: I will come on the clouds of glory and put you on trial for a true execution of justice.

Surely it is this knowledge of the purpose and plan of God that sustained our Lord as He faced the folly and cruelty of sinful men. He not only looked at the cross but through it to the accomplishment of the plan of God.

3B. Third, they announce the verdict

The high priest tore his clothes (breaking a commandment, Lev. 10:6; 21:10, chief priest is not to tear his clothes!). Then, he added more poison to an already poisoned well: **He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy.** (v. 65). We are not surprised that when he asked for the view of the Council, they quickly replied: **He is worthy of death** (v. 66). This is an astounding proclamation regarding Christ in the highest court ever convened!

4B. Fourth, they mock and abuse Jesus

It appears that these high officials of the church, these spiritual leaders, these "holy" and "pious" men display deep personal contempt for Jesus. Some of them, at least, spit on Him, beat Him, and taunted Him (vs. 67-68): **Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him,<sup>68</sup> saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"**

## Conclusion

This is shocking. This is a shocking display of human folly and depravity, and a marvelous display of our Savior's loving commitment to save you and me. It is painful to walk with the Lord through this radical injustice. It drives us to the fundamental question: "What can we say to these things?" We can begin with some suggestive thoughts on which to build.

### 1) Residual memories

In the memories and thoughts of people at large throughout the world there remain tidbits of factual information about the Lord Jesus. People quote famous sayings from the OT (let there be light; an eye for an eye) and from the NT (turn the other cheek; give to Cesar what belongs to Cesar). In this connection, Walter Pigeon plays a military officer in the movie *Command Division* (1948) in which he quotes from the parable of the talents. Trying to get more planes and troops for the war, he said something to this effect, “This reminds me of the parable of the talents as to how hard...how difficult...it must have been for those men to do their jobs with what had been given to them.” He suggests that the men in the parable were not given enough by the master. Thus, he faults the master as providing inadequately, and that is what Congress is doing when it fails to provide adequate supplies to the troops. To say the least, the writers of the movie use the quote out of context and consequently misapply it.

Notable here is the way the sayings of Jesus “hang” in the memories of people, even ungodly people. They remember what He said but they misquote it. Naturally, they misunderstand it if they begin with the wrong text, and do not go back to get to the root of it. Furthermore, they misrepresent it; they use it against Christ. The Sanhedrin is the highest court ever to convene. They rendered the most important judgment ever rendered. Doing so, they committed the logical fallacy of defeating a straw man. Sinners confront Christ and judge Him; they confront the face of God in every fact of life. Suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, they remember, misquote, misunderstand, and misapply the sayings of Jesus.

### 2) Sovereign silence

In His prophetic office as our great teacher, Jesus chooses to teach through the temple parable (proverb, or saying): **destroy this temple and in three days, I will raise it up** (Jn. 2.19). His conduct by silence continues His prophetic teaching. He uses parable to provoke thought and a seeking faith; it hides the truth from some and reveals it to others (Mat. 13.11). Those who hear it, misquote it, and misunderstand it with the clear intention of misusing it against the Lord will have no explanation. They will receive no clarification, but only silence. The case is similar for the atheist who says he will believe if Christ were to appear before him, here and now, at his demands of logic and experience. This man does not seek Christ; He seeks a god (small g) over which he is master; he demands a spectacle. To all such “seeking” Christ responds with silence.

Jesus exercises His authority as Messiah, as Sabbath king, on His way to His exaltation by choosing when to speak and choosing when to remain silent.

His silence governs the actions of the Council and the high priest. They had no substance in the quotation/misquotation of His parabolic word about “this temple.” By not responding, Jesus moved the discussion along to other things. They had to leave the false and contradictory testimonies. If He had explained His meaning, then this red herring would have become the topic of more discussion. This is not the battle Jesus chose to fight at this moment in His trial. He will speak, but not about this parable. He is not going to go back to the actual quote, its true meaning, and its proper application. He reveals the Father to whom He chooses to reveal Him (Mat. 11.27).

### 3) Redemptive deed

His ultimate explanation of the parable is by His accomplished work of redemption, by what He does in His enemies’ hands, under the wrath of the Father, and by His resurrection. His answer is His profound humiliation and His marvelous resurrection. Later, the disciples remember the temple saying after the resurrection and that confirms their faith (Jn. 2.22).

His silence at that point in the trial now echoes in our ears. All who pass by the cross can hear this echo. He that has ears for hearing can hear this echo. Thus, the question becomes, “He was silent, and what exactly was He silent about?” The answer remains in the parable: destroy this temple and I will raise it up again. The silence now abides as another reminder that He died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day.

By His silence, Jesus puts the parable in bold and italic print. It is the good news reiterated to those who seek Him by pursuing what He in fact says, what He means, and how it applies in the salvation of sinners, how it applies to you and me.

Consider some details. Sinners must stand before God's wrath in utter silence; they can raise no word in their own defense. Jesus by His silence identifies Himself with sinners and faces the wrath of God in their place. The very point at which He is silent, the temple parable, contains the message regarding how He becomes the redeemer of God's elect. This parable remains as a testimony to His accomplishment first by humiliation, and then, by exaltation. Jesus calls Himself the temple. He is the temple of God, the house of God, the gate of heaven, and the place of the presence of God. He is the ladder that extends from earth to heaven and upon whom the angels of God ascend and descend (Gen. 28.10-17; Jn. 1.51). He is our mediator that brings us into the presence of God with a welcome as sons and daughters because His very body was destroyed in death but raised in newness of life. His sovereign silence speaks loudly by His redemptive action.

#### 4) Cruel mockery

Why is the mockery of Christ on the record (26.67-68)? Even though it must convey to us a bit of what Christ suffered in the hands of sinners, the account is truly objective and not subjective. That is, we do not "hear Him groaning." We have no record of how He received the insults and blows. The text does not tell us anything about the thoughts, words, or even painful utterances of our Lord during this time.

The account surely reveals to us the cruel depravity, folly, and arrogance of man. Confronted with truth and holiness and being unable to make a legitimate case against Jesus, all they can do is charge Him on the basis of what is false and unholy. Without question, they mistreat Jesus as He stands before them vulnerable, allowing them to do what they will. The entire trial is a mockery, just as hateful as the aftermath. Thus, the account reveals the depravity of men, even the most religious men who have God's word and law entrusted to them for safe keeping, and for the promotion of righteousness!

Still, there is more here that surfaces in the details of the mockery of Christ. They mock Him as a supposed Messiah-prophet who would tell them their names if He were really prophetically gifted. A denial that Jesus spoke the truth as God's mouthpiece is present in every taunt and in every slap to the face (26.67-68): <sup>67</sup> **Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him,** <sup>68</sup> **saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"** This is mockery become defiance, "poisonous and demonic" (Schilder, *Trial*, 187).

Again, the question begs for an answer: why does Matthew include these details in his record? We should think that he would do so to draw attention to our Lord as the Messiah-prophet because that is the claim that they mock and deny; that is the claim that they hurry to suppress. They want to get Jesus out of their sight with every claim He made buried with Him in the dirt. They say, "You claim that you are the Messiah and you back your claim with prophetic utterances, but your claim is false and your prophetic utterances give no support since you cannot even name the names of the people that spit on you, strike you, and slap you around. Does this not show that you are nothing but a piece of scum that we rightly despise, reject, and scorn with laughter at your expense?"

It turns out that though Jesus is silent, He still has the last word. When we pull back the curtain on this very mockery, we see the true irony of the event because God is mocking them. Listen to Psalm 59: they come **howling like dogs and prowling about the city.** <sup>7</sup> **There they are, bellowing with their mouths with swords in their lips- for "Who," they think, "will hear us?"** <sup>8</sup> **But you, O LORD, laugh at them; you hold all the nations in derision.** <sup>9</sup> **O my Strength, I will watch for you, for you, O God, are my fortress.** <sup>10</sup> **My God in his steadfast love will meet me; God will let me look in triumph on my enemies (6-10).** Similarly, in Psalm 2, the Lord sits in the heavenly court and laughs at them: **Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his anointed, saying, <sup>3</sup> "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."** <sup>4</sup> **He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.** <sup>5</sup> **Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, <sup>6</sup> "As for me,**

**I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." <sup>7</sup> I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you.** The Lord mocks them as He uses their mockery to raise Christ from the dead.

How can this be the case here in the night court? Two facts reveal it. 1) According to the prophetic word of God (Isa. 53), men reject and despise the Messiah. These men identify who Jesus is in truth in every act of disdain. 2) Their actions begin the fulfillment of the prophecy of Christ regarding the destruction of His body. Correctly stated, He said that if they destroy the temple of His body, and they will destroy it, then He will raise it up again. As they beat Him and slap Him, they begin the destruction of "this temple." They set the fulfillment of His prophetic word in motion; they reveal that He spoke the truth. They affirm that He is indeed what He declared to be under oath: He is the Messiah the Son of God and Son of Man.

The cruel and punishing ridicule confirms that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God. Therefore, the gospel surfaces here in a powerful way amidst the darkness of sin and the toll it takes from the human family by its wage of death. For here as sinners begin to destroy the body of Christ, the truthfulness of His oath is added to the promise that He will conquer death by resurrection. That promise is sure. God raised Him from the dead. That promise is a gospel word of promise in which God bears witness to Himself and swears by Himself for our assurance. His resurrection promises our resurrection. In our darkness, in the destruction of our body that afflicts us because of sin, in our dying and death (Rom. 8.10), we can now say, <sup>25</sup> **For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.** <sup>26</sup> **And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God** (Job 19.25-26; **And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God,** KJV, v. 26).

It is truly amazing that this negative and disturbing narrative about the treatment of our Lord is good news because the very troubling event confirms our Lord's prophetic word, identifies Him as the Messiah in truth, and it promises both His and our resurrection from the literal destruction of the body. His oath added to His promise is our assuring word. We have an anchor for our faith because Jesus is Messiah-prophet-God in flesh and it is impossible for Him to lie.

He is our redeemer and Matthew fleshes out what that means. He tells us that the spit belongs on our faces, the bruises on our heads, and the slaps on our cheeks. His condemnation was for our justification. He suffered innumerable reproaches so that we may be free of all reproach; no one can put a charge at our feet in the courtroom of heaven; no charge will stick. They bruised Him for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was on His head. He endured the punishment that belongs to us. When they began to destroy His body by mockery and derision, many lifted their hands against Him, but this was only the anticipation of the full destruction of His life that came when the deepest stroke pierced Him. Jesus knew full well who struck Him for these are the blows that the Father in justice gave.

Men say; Aha, that good-for-nothing! They are wrong. God says: Aha, that worthless one! And he is right. For Christ stands in our stead, "He who knew no 'worthlessness', Him hath God made 'worthlessness' for us" (Schilder, 191).

Jesus endured the mockery of God! It is profound humiliation, but gloriously, His punishment is our deliverance from punishment. Jesus is the Messiah and as Messiah, He is our redeemer, and as our redeemer, He is our patient prophet who continues to teach us how to make our journey through life to eternal glory. In a word, His condemnation in the highest court on earth **and in heaven** is our justification.

**We must fall down before the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man; let us then do so in the midst of the congregation of His elect; by the blessing of the Holy Spirit may we worship and praise Him to the glory of the triune God, now and forevermore, amen.**