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A Trial for the Ages

John 18:13-27

Intro: In 2006, the US recorded 102.4 million trials took place in state courts across the country. That's a lot of legal action; too much to really pay attention to but there have been certain trials over the years that have captured the attention of the entire nation. In the 20th Century, there was the Lindbergh trial, the Nuremberg war crimes trials and the Rosenberg trial. The 2 trials that garnered the most public attention were the Watergate and the OJ trial. These trials have engaged the minds and imaginations of millions but no trial has so challenged our race or so charged our emotions as the trial of Jesus by the Jewish and Roman authorities in Judea. These other trials were tame and run-of-the-mill compared to the trial and execution of Jesus of Nazareth.

This week we will focus on the Jewish trial of Jesus and next time we'll look at the Roman trial. We must take this study of this trial it in stages because there is quite a bit of material on this subject, most of which we will not have time to consider but also because Jesus is not the only one on trial here in this section.

13-14, 17-24- There are actually 2 parts to the Jewish trial of Jesus but John only records the first part in his Gospel – the trial before Annas. The one common thread we must understand about the Jewish trial of Jesus is that nearly every aspect of it, if not every aspect, was illegal. From the arrest to the pre-trial hearing with Annas to the secondary inquiry with Caiaphas later in the night to the early morning hearing with the full Sanhedrin was out of order and in direct violation of not only the Law of Moses but also both the Mishnah and the Gemara that make up the Talmud.

To understand what is going on in our text today, we must know a little bit about the Jewish legal system Jesus was being tried under. Of course, there were many reasons a person could be taken to court but we need only address the legal requirements for a capitol case. 1st) the only court authorized to sit in capitol cases in Israel was the Great Sanhedrin. This was the 70-member legal body that convened in Jerusalem to deliberate important legal matters. 2nd) the qualifications for a judge were the same as

for a member of the Sanhedrin. One particular requirement of note was that a member could not sit in judgment if he had a personal interest in the outcome of a capital trial. Even a well-qualified member would have to step aside if they were related to the accused or could benefit from a verdict.

3rd) The qualifications and role of witnesses in Jewish capital cases was much more important than in the trials we're familiar with. 1: There must be 2 or more witnesses; 2: their testimonies must fully agree in the main circumstances of both the offense and the manner in which it was committed, plus, each witness must be able to testify that they saw the other witnesses while watching the accused engaged in the crime. 3: the witnesses themselves must be the accusers. Jewish law didn't provide for prosecuting attorneys or defense attorneys. The witnesses to the crime were in effect the prosecutors. They were responsible for arranging for the arrest of the accused as well as for bringing them to trial. 4: witnesses were required to have explicitly warned the accused of potential legal consequence of the crime immediately before the crime was committed. Clearly, it would be next to impossible to call enough qualified witnesses to execute a capital case in Israel but that was the intent of the law. The Jews so highly regarded the life of an Israelite that anything that could legally forestall an execution was rigorously employed.

4th) Capital trials were to be conducted in the daytime. Judges were never to seek to condemn the accused; they were to always take his side and seek every means for his acquittal (defense attorneys). The accused could not be convicted by a bare majority; 32 of 71 judges must vote to condemn. Also, a unanimous vote to condemn was also invalid. This was considered to be an emotional decision based on mob action. The guilty vote and the sentence could not be announced on the same day. This rule allowed the assembly to adjourn and go home to consider if something had been overlooked that would lead to an acquittal. Another vote would be taken the next day and if there was a vote to condemn, they would deliberate for the rest of that day as well until all avenues of acquittal had been exhausted.

The point is, Jesus wasn't condemned under a primitive, barbaric or inadequate judicial system, but under the best! Jesus, the righteous One, was condemned to death under the most merciful and careful system of judicial processes known to mankind. How could this happen? The problem wasn't with the judicial system, it was in the hearts of those who interpreted

and implemented the system. The human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked... (Jer 17:9). It was the wicked hearts of men that actually used the merciful law to condemn an innocent man.

Why was Jesus brought before Annas if he wasn't the High Priest? The Mosaic Law stipulated that a person was supposed to fill the office of High Priest for the rest of his life. Annas was High Priest when the Romans took control of Judea; they didn't care for him or the Mosaic Law so they deposed him and gave someone else the position. 5 of Annas' sons would serve as High Priest and at this time, his son-in-law Caiaphas held the position. Apparently, the Jewish authorities still considered Annas as the defacto High Priest so they brought Jesus to him first.

Annas conducted what we would call a preliminary hearing (illegal). He asked Jesus about His disciples and His doctrine. Of course, Annas was just looking for some kind of evidence that he could use to bring a verdict of capitol punishment against Jesus. Jesus refuses to answer his questions, showing that He knew Jewish law pretty well – accusations must come from witnesses, not the accused. Jesus had every right to be tried properly by the laws of Israel. Jesus didn't answer Annas' questions but He did have an answer for Annas.

First, notice that Jesus didn't say anything about His disciples. Annas may have asked about them out of fear: Are they organized to overthrow the government? One of them was wielding a sword earlier in the evening. He may have asked this out of jealousy; it's hard to say. But Jesus is clearly determined to protect His disciples to the very end. In His response, He emphatically refers to Himself 3 times in vs20: "I spoke...I always taught...I have said." Think of it; while Peter was out in the courtyard denying Jesus, Jesus was on trial protecting Peter!

As far as His doctrine was concerned, He didn't have a secret doctrine that needed to be exposed by interrogation. He didn't have a harmless teaching for the general public and a subversive teaching for secret revolutionaries. What He said to His disciples was just a further explanation of what He taught in public. The essence of His teaching was public property. In fact, Annas could have come and listened to Him himself!

In vs21, Jesus isn't being uncooperative or necessarily evasive, as we might

think. He is merely asserting His legal right. There was to be no formal charge made against the accused until witnesses had been heard and found to be truthful and accurate. Jesus is merely stating that if He is going to be tried under the Mosaic Law, He should at least be tried in accordance with that Law. The response from the court was a punch in the face. Clearly, this court was partial. Jesus merely repeats His previous position. If there was any wrongdoing, it should be brought forward legally and established by witnesses. If not, then the blow He received was improper. Jesus knew His rights but He did not insist upon them. He is to serve as an example for us when we also suffer wrongfully.

15-18, 25-27 – While Jesus was on trial inside, Peter was on trial outside. Much can be said about his denial and the steps that lead him to this miserable position but Jesus had warned Peter that he would be sifted by Satan, which is never a fun thing but it can produce a good result. Jesus had also told Peter that He would pray that he would come out of this experience stronger for it. No doubt John intertwines the story of Peter's fall with the story of Jesus' trial to show that even the followers of Jesus are not free from guilt in their relationships to Him. True, they don't hate Him like Annas and Caiaphas did and their not indifferent towards Him as Pilate was. But they do deny Him many times, just like Peter did. Why? Usually, it's because we're too fond of the world and too captivated with its alluring culture.

Remember, it was Peter, the leader of the disciples, that denied Jesus; not anyone else. If it had been someone like Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night for fear of what people might say, or the rich young ruler who loved his riches more than he loved Jesus, it wouldn't be a big shock. But it was Peter – the bold, the courageous, the very same one who had emphatically declared to Jesus, “Even if all were made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble” (**Matt 26:33**). The point is, if Peter fell then anyone can fall; the strong as well as the weak. Often, it may even be the strongest who are in the greatest danger of falling.

If this is a trial of Peter, what can we first say in his defense? Peter at least followed Jesus when all the others (except maybe John) had fled and abandoned Him. Clearly, Peter loved Jesus. Why else would he risk capture by following the arresting party all the way back to Jerusalem? Peter tried to defend Jesus. It was an unsuccessful act of the flesh that was contrary to

the will of God and the spirit of Jesus but it was still a strong act that was done out of passionate concern for his Master. Finally, it was Peter who unequivocally confessed Jesus to be, “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This wasn’t some miserable specimen plucked from the ranks of Jesus’ worst followers. This was the best. Yet it’s precisely this one who falls, not just horribly but quickly and with just a slight provocation.

Obviously, Peter was hoping for a second chance to show his loyalty to Jesus; he would have at least 3 more. His first test of loyalty, this fiery trial, this withering interrogation came from a passing inquiry from a slave girl who kept the door (17). This was no legal official, this wasn’t a formal accusation; it wasn’t even a strenuous challenge. Peter could’ve ignored the question, could’ve mumble under his breath or just said, “I know Him.” But the way her question was posed implied that she expected a negative answer and hearing this suggested line of escape, Peter gratefully took it up. In his first test of loyalty, Peter denied Jesus by denying that he belonged to His band of disciples. Having denied his Lord once, he finds it easy, even necessary, to do so again.

As Peter stands with the crowd around the fire, trying not to be noticed, they continue to ask him if he is an associate of Jesus. Notice they asked, “you are not also one of His disciples...” Peter’s fighting a losing battle. They all know he showed up with a guy who was known to be a disciple of Jesus. They’re just putting 2 and 2 together. But Peter’s not having any of that. Finally, a relative of Malchus, the guy whose ear Peter had just cut off a little while ago, asked him point blank, “Did I not see you in the garden with Him?” Peter’s resistance breaks down completely. Mt 26:74 tells us Peter began to curse and swear. This doesn’t mean he let loose a stream of profanities. It means he put himself under a curse in order to emphasize the truth of his statement, which actually wasn’t true at all. But, Peter was on trial so he put himself under an oath to convince his accusers that he was telling the truth, even though he wasn’t.

What was Peter’s undoing? 1) He was overconfident. If we become overconfident, if we think we’re invincible because we’re strong or talented or too wise to be touched by the dangers of our society, then we’re well on our way to falling. Jesus said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing” (15:5). Nothing means nothing! Whenever we forget that, we’re in trouble. 2) He failed to pray. Jesus prayed but Peter slept. Sadly, many churches and

believers are asleep today even though Paul exhorts us to “pray without ceasing” (I Thess 5:17). Usually, we fail to pray because we don’t think it’s necessary. 3) Peter followed at a distance. This is true of many believers today. They honestly follow Jesus but follow at a distance because they don’t want to go overboard in spiritual things or they don’t want to lose touch with the world around them. They may think they’re at a safe distance but actually, they’re in greater danger. When Jesus calls us to follow Him, He calls us to follow in His footsteps – that means right behind Him. Jesus is the victorious One and He has guaranteed victory. In the midst of the battle, the safest place to be is right next to Him.

John doesn’t record it but all the other Gospel writers tell us that when the rooster crowed, it reminded Peter of what Jesus had told him and he went out and wept bitterly. Peter had denied Jesus 3 times but this rooster brought 3 pieces of good news to Peter and to us. 1st) The crowing rooster was further assurance to Peter that Jesus was in complete control of the situation, even though He was bound and harassed by the authorities. By controlling 1 bird, Jesus affirms His sovereignty. 2nd) The crowing rooster was an invitation for Peter to repent. Luke says that Jesus turned and looked at Peter at this point and it was this look of love that broke Peter’s heart. Jesus still loved him even though he denied Him (II Tim 2:11-13). 3rd) A crowing rooster is an announcement of the dawning of a new day! Peter went out and wept bitter tears of godly sorrow that led him to true repentance. Jesus would later restore Peter and enable him to serve with great power and blessing. Yes, Peter was weak but Jesus was gracious and still is!

Maybe you’ve been overconfident in your Christian walk. Maybe you’ve failed to pray, failed to study the Word, failed to draw close to Jesus and be filled with the power of His Spirit and have stumbled because of it. Maybe you’ve been following Jesus from a distance and have had plenty of opportunities to express your loyalty to Him but have failed to do so time and time again. Maybe you have gone so far as to deny Him. We might think that is just the most horrible and inconceivable thing a Christian could do but actually, it’s quite easy to do and it’s done so often and in so many ways that we don’t even notice it anymore. But Jesus does, and the world does too!

Have we been with Jesus? If we have been with Jesus then we have been

seen with Him. If that's the case then certain things should be expected of us because we've been with Him. In fact, the world expects to see certain things from us, things associated with our profession of Christ. If we say we belong to Jesus, if He is our Savior and Lord, then we should profess what He professes; His priorities should be ours; His doctrine; His values; all should be ours.

We're not free to acquire our culture from the world we've been saved out of; our theology and values must be His. If we have been with Jesus then the world has the right to expect certain patterns of behavior and character from us.

Finally, not only were Jesus and Peter on trial but so were the religious authorities of Israel. They had all of the OT prophecies concerning the Messiah, they had both the teaching and the claims of Jesus backed up by eye-witness accounts of His super-natural power to heal, to deliver, to give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and life to the dead. They had all of this, the testimony of truth and volumes of indisputable evidence to back it up but they refused to accept any of it. They rejected the truth; they rejected the evidence; they rejected their own Messiah. What must be their verdict? Could it be anything other than guilty?

But, this was not just the trial of the ages; this was the trial for all ages. Not only were the religious authorities on trial but so has everyone since that time. But here's the thing – the people who reject Jesus today, are they as guilty as the religious leaders were? No, they're more guilty! How so? The religious leaders had a ton of evidence but at this time, they didn't have the evidence of His resurrection, His ascension back into heaven. They also didn't have the NT or the full teaching of it through the scholarly works of theologians over the centuries who have clearly presented who Jesus is, why He came to die, the significance of His death, the meaning of His resurrection and the necessity of a response of faith that people are called on to make to Him

All this evidence is available to everyone today. If you reject it or, worse, refuse even to consider it, your guilt is greater than the guilt of the Jewish Sanhedrin. But if you will consider it and accept it, it's sufficient by the power of the Holy Spirit to lead you to saving faith in Jesus. Who is Jesus? He's the Messiah, the Son of God. He wants to be your Savior. He's the only One who can be – will you accept Him? 😊