

## Chapter 108: The Trial of Jesus

*Matthew 26:57–68*

Having submitted to his Father’s will in Gethsemane, the actions of those surrounding Jesus proceed exactly as he has foretold. Jesus does not in the least resist as false witnesses are summoned, his testimony is twisted into the worst possible light, and he is ultimately condemned and abused. As Jesus patiently endures everything that happens, his glory shines all the more brightly. It would be one thing if Jesus were condemned for a real crime that he did not commit. In this passage, however, Jesus is condemned based on the truth of his testimony that he is the Christ, the Son of God. In this trial, *Jesus suffered for righteousness’ sake.*

### **False Claims (Matt. 26:57–61)**

After Jesus’ arrest, his captors led him to “Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered” (v. 57). The groups of people represented here suggest that this is the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. The fact that the Sanhedrin gathered in the middle of the night suggests the magnitude of the case in their eyes, as well as the importance of haste in dealing with Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Jewish rabbinical teaching produced a tractate on the rules under which the Sanhedrin operated.<sup>2</sup> Under these rules, a number of important procedural requirements were violated:<sup>3</sup> (1) “In cases of capital law, the court judges during the daytime, and concludes the deliberations and issues the ruling only in the daytime” (*Sanh.* 4:1). (2) “In cases of capital law, the court may conclude the deliberations and issue the ruling even on that same day to acquit the accused, but must wait until the following day to find him liable. Therefore, since capital cases might continue for two days, the court does not judge cases of capital law on certain days, neither on the eve of Shabbat nor the eve of a Festival” (*Sanh.* 4:1). (3) “The court would examine the witnesses in capital cases with seven interrogations, i.e., interrogatory questions...” (*Sanh.* 5:1). (4) If two witnesses agree in their testimony about an alleged crime, the council of the Sanhedrin should then “open the deliberations with an appeal to anyone who can find a reason to acquit the accused” (*Sanh.* 5:4).

Even so, we should evaluate the proceedings of the this trial against the rules of the Mishnah with two caveats: (1) these rules were written nearly two hundred years after the trial of Jesus, so it is difficult to know how closely they reflect the proceedings in the early first century; (2) emergencies could be considered sufficient reason to suspend the rules.<sup>4</sup> Instead, it is best to evaluate this trial at a

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<sup>1</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1056.

<sup>2</sup> “Mishnah Sanhedrin,” one of the ten tractates of the Seder Nezikin (“Order of Damages”). Available online: <[https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Sanhedrin](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Sanhedrin)>

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 679.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 679.

high level, where we see “that the Son of God was oppressed by a wicked conspiracy of the whole council” by “a frightful and hideous spectacle” as “all of them unite in conspiring to extinguish the only hope of salvation.”<sup>5</sup>

Before we get to the actual trial, Matthew offers a side comment about Peter: “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” (v. 58). This comment does not have any immediate relevance, but it sets up the narrative in the following section by explaining how Peter had arrived after fleeing in Matthew 26:56. By “the end,” Matthew means that Peter wants to see the “outcome” of the trial.<sup>6</sup> We know that John was also present during this trial (John 18:15–16), but we do not read that any of the other disciples ventured to infiltrate the court of the high priest. This is an important detail to fill out our understanding of the character of Peter. Yes, Peter had just abandoned Jesus, and yes, Peter would soon deny Jesus three times. Nevertheless, in the midst of all this, Peter is one of only two disciples who cannot bear to stay away from Jesus during this time. Peter fails in many ways, but he succeeds in ways that the others do not—indeed, in ways that we would not succeed, if we were in the same situation.

In vv. 59–60a, Matthew tells us that the Sanhedrin sought “false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death,” but altho they struggled to find testimony that was both credible and conclusively condemning. Here we see the nature of the legalism of these leaders: though they are willing to solicit false testimony (and, very likely, to set aside several procedural rules in the name of an “emergency”), they nevertheless make sure to put on a sufficiently convincing external show. In part, this allows these leaders to maintain an appearance of righteousness, since “the most villanous judges still cling to a show of legal formalities.”<sup>7</sup> More than that, however, the appearance of propriety will become essential later when the Romans will require a bare minimum of evidence in order to sign off on capital punishment.<sup>8</sup> Whereas the Romans largely allows the Jews (and other conquered nations) to handle their own affairs in their own way, the Romans “kept the death penalty in their own hands and reserved the right to take over any case at any stage they chose.”<sup>9</sup> We should keep in mind throughout this trial that the unfairness of it was a part of our Lord’s humiliation: “For the absolutely sinless One to be subjected to a trial conducted by sinful men was in itself a deep humiliation. To be tried by *such* men, under *such* circumstances made it infinitely worse.”<sup>10</sup>

In vv. 60b–61, Matthew tells us that the Sanhedrin finally landed on testimony that would stick: “This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’” While the continuation of the trial (including the badgering of the defendant in vv. 62–63) suggest that this testimony was not conclusive on its own, “the fact that this testimony was allowed after much else had been refused suggests that the prosecutors believed it would be useful.”<sup>11</sup> The purported testimony that characterized Jesus as saying that he is *able* to destroy and rebuild the temple suggests

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:253.

<sup>6</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1057.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1058.

<sup>8</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 928.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 678.

<sup>10</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 928.

<sup>11</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 799.

the direction that the remainder of the trial will go, since it had “the effect of shifting attention to the authority or power claimed in such a statement. And it was in the personal claims of Jesus that the Jewish authorities thought their best hope of doing away with Jesus lay (thus the high priest’s question of v 63b).”<sup>12</sup>

### Good Confession (Matt. 26:62–64)

After the witnesses offer their testimony, the high priest asks Jesus, “Have you no answer to make?” (v. 62a). The way this question is phrased hints at the silence of Jesus, an issue that will arise again in the next verse. Whatever has happened so far (and Matthew has given us largely only a broad summary), through it all Jesus has been silent. Even now, when two witnesses offer testimony that seems to go “against” (v. 62b) Jesus, the defendant has said nothing in his own defense. All four Gospel accounts mention Jesus’ silence, but interpreters have drawn different conclusions about it.<sup>13</sup> Although in our culture silence can be a technique of defense, since “everything you say can and will be held against you in the court of law,” this motive is not behind Jesus’ silence. Instead, his silence is likely more bound up in “a refusal to fight back,” along the same lines by which he refused to request angelic assistance (Matt. 26:53).<sup>14</sup> Whereas others would have spoken up to protest their innocence, Jesus had submitted to the will of his Father to go to the cross: “So what did it matter that these men, whom everybody there knew to be lying, made false assertions about what he had said on some earlier occasion? There was nothing to be said; therefore he remained silent.”<sup>15</sup>

In v. 63a, Matthew tells us that Jesus did not respond to the demands of the high priest to answer his accusers: “But Jesus remained silent.” In the face of Jesus’ ongoing silence, the high priest puts Jesus under “the weightiest oath... ‘by the living God’”<sup>16</sup> to answer him: “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God” (v. 63b). Very likely, the high priest did not think that even the testimony had been enough to convict Jesus in the eyes of the Romans, leading him in desperation to solicit a confession from Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Although Jesus was not interested in speaking for the sake of his defense, he takes this opportunity to make a clear confession of his identity:<sup>18</sup> “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” (v. 64). His language of the “Son of Man” sitting “at the right hand of Power” and “coming on the clouds of heaven” is an allusion to Daniel 7:13–14. Jesus insists that they will see Jesus take this position of honor “from now on,” which means that he likely does not have in view his final return (*parousia*). Instead, he is speaking about his exaltation at his resurrection and ascension and, as in Matthew 24:30, his coming in judgment against these leaders who are about to condemn him.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 799.

<sup>13</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 683.

<sup>14</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1129.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 683.

<sup>16</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 931.

<sup>17</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1061–62.

<sup>18</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1064.

<sup>19</sup> For this exegesis, see France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1027.

## Wrongful Conviction (Matt. 26:65–68)

In one sense, the high priest interprets Jesus' testimony accurately, as a self-identification of being the Messiah. Nevertheless, in another sense, the high priest misinterprets the truthfulness of this statement, and, therefore, rather than seeing this as the unveiling of the Messiah, he considers Jesus' testimony as blasphemy (v. 65a). As a further confirmation that the testimony against Jesus was of doubtful strength to justify a conviction, the high priest asks, "What further witnesses to we need? You have now heard his blasphemy" (v. 65b). To the high priest, this claim was so absurd and so odious as to lead him to tear his robes and to ask immediately for a verdict from the Sanhedrin: "What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death" (v. 66). No one seriously considered whether Jesus might be telling the truth.

Immediately after pronouncing the verdict, "they" began to abuse Jesus (v. 67a). It is unclear whether "they" refers to the members of the Sanhedrin or to guards holding Jesus in custody (Mark 14:65; Luke 22:63–65; John 18:22). Even if they did not perpetrate the abuse, the members of the Sanhedrin seem at least to tolerate it. As Nolland writes, "Cruel and vindictive belittlement is often the fate of a person of influence who has been discredited. Sadistic pleasure is found in the fall of the mighty, and perhaps even more in the fall of those who have reached too high."<sup>20</sup> As Calvin comments, they disfigured the face of the one who, by this abuse, would restore the image of God in us that had been disfigured by the Fall.<sup>21</sup> While the world turns all of its wrath against Jesus, our Lord patiently endures it all as he faithfully makes his way to the cross to fulfill the will of his Father.

## Discussion Questions

1. Who are the "scribes and elders" who had gathered to judge Jesus (v. 57)? What kind of rules governed the trials that they conducted for accused persons? How well do their procedures follow those rules, or even the general principles of justice? Why, then, did they make a show of a trial at all? What kind of testimony do the two witnesses offer (v. 61)? Is this accurate to what Jesus said (John 2:19)? Does this testimony suggest any crime worthy of death?
2. Why do you think that Jesus is silent in the face of his accusers (v. 62)? Why does Jesus' silence bother the high priest? What does it mean for the high priest to "adjure" Jesus "by the living God" (v. 63)? What does Jesus say in response (v. 64)? How does Jesus' response echo the language of Daniel 7:13–14? What significance does that prophecy have? Is Jesus' testimony true? What, then, about this testimony got him into so much trouble?
3. Why does the high priest consider Jesus' testimony "blasphemy" (v. 65)? Why does the Sanhedrin condemn Jesus to death for this "blasphemy" (v. 66)? Were the Jews permitted to execute criminals on their own? How will this trial connect with the negotiations with Pilate in the next chapter? What does the abuse that Jesus suffers tell us about our Savior's faithfulness? How does the physical

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<sup>20</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1135.

<sup>21</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1135.

pain connect with his emotional and spiritual anguish that he suffered in the garden?

4. Read 1 Peter 2:18–25, remembering that Peter was an eyewitness to this trial (v. 58). What does Peter say is “gracious” and “good” about “suffering unjustly” (1 Pet. 2:19–20)? How does our suffering relate to Jesus’ suffering? How does Jesus’ suffering heal and restore us (1 Pet. 2:24–25)? How does Jesus’ suffering provide an example after which we should pattern our suffering? How are you responding to the unjust suffering in your life today?