

“A Story of Injustice and Denial”

February 25, 2024

Matthew 26:57-75

I. Introduction

Since each of the Gospels was written with a different theme and audience in mind, each Gospel records different events that followed Jesus’ arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. John wrote that before Jesus was taken to Caiaphas, they “brought him first to Annas” (John 18:13). Turn to John 18:12-14, 19-24. Some 20 years earlier, Annas had served as high priest for 4 or 5 years. To demonstrate their power, the Roman government then replaced him as the ruling high priest. But, in the eyes of the people, Annas still carried that title and, for that reason, continued to have great influence in the Temple. Annas was a shrewd politician and was something like a “godfather” in the workings of the temple as his 5 sons and now Caiaphas, his son-in-law, had succeeded him as high priest.

Because Jesus of Nazareth was a threat to Annas’ power, prestige, security, and prosperity, He was thoroughly despised by the high priest. Everything Jesus said or did seemed to make him angry. But, in spite of his anger, Annas didn’t have anything to accuse Jesus of—this in itself was a testimony of Jesus’ sinlessness. So, after trying unsuccessfully to get Jesus to incriminate Himself, Annas had no other option but to have Jesus sent to Caiaphas. Here Matthew picked up the story of injustice. To see how unjust, consider the rules under which the Sanhedrin functioned.

II. A Story of Injustice

A. Rules of Operation As the supreme court of the Jews, the Sanhedrin was composed of lawyers, Pharisees, Sadducees, and elders of the people. It numbered 71 members and was presided over by the high priest. It had certain regulations. Before a trial could begin, the defendant had to be charged with a crime. All criminal cases had to be tried during the daytime. Trials were to be open to the public and the defendant had the right to bring forth evidence and witnesses on his own behalf.

Rabbinical law also required that a death sentence could not be carried out until the 3rd day after the trial and that during the intervening day, the members of the court were to pray and fast. The delay of an

execution provided additional time for evidence or testimony to be discovered on the defendant's behalf. Further, no decision of the Sanhedrin was valid unless it met in its own meeting place, the Hall of Hewn Stone on the Temple grounds.

Jesus' trial and conviction were a total sham. In the beginning, He wasn't charged with a crime. He was tried at night and in private. He wasn't allowed any defense, and the witnesses against Him had been bribed to lie. He was executed on the same day He was sentenced which meant the judges could not have fasted on the intervening day nor was there any time to reconsider the verdict. It was a kangaroo court.

B. The Kangaroo Court While Annas and a few leaders questioned Jesus, Caiaphas, disregarding the rules, assembled the rest of the Sanhedrin in his palatial house across the adjoining courtyard in the middle of the night. Caiaphas and those gathered with him had already determined that Jesus was guilty and must die. This was a kangaroo court; they were just going to go through the motions of a legal trial. Because of their hatred of Jesus, these leaders were willing to go to any means to condemn Him. Since Jesus was innocent of any wrong, they were unable come up with any legitimate witnesses. The only way to convict Him was on the basis of false testimony. Finally, out of a pack of false witnesses, there were two who testified that Jesus said, "**I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.**"

Jesus' actual words are found in [John 2:19](#) where He said, "**Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.**" Jesus had meant His body, but His critics assumed He was referring to the Jerusalem Temple—the one He had just cleansed. In addition, the 2 false witnesses had added to what Jesus had said: "**I am able to destroy the temple.**" It was a serious matter to speak against the Temple; it was this very charge that later led to the death of Stephen in [Acts 6:12-14](#).

C. Jesus reply When confronted with the false charge, Jesus fulfilled the prophesy from [Isaiah 53:7](#), "**He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.**" Whatever He would have said would have been distorted anyway. He couldn't explain the spiritual meaning of what He had said to this group of worldly-minded men, so He was silent. [Turn to 1 Peter 2:22-23.](#) It was the silence of innocence and dignity and integrity; it was a silence of trust in God.

D. The Final Verdict The Council members were getting very frustrated; they desperately needed to get the trial done before dawn when the people would start milling about the city and the illegal activity of the Council would be discovered. They also needed to get done quickly so that they could prepare for their own Passover sacrifices and duties that afternoon. So, Caiaphas changed his attack and, putting Jesus under oath, demanded that Jesus either affirm or deny that He was the Messiah. I suspect that Caiaphas stood nose to nose to Jesus and screamed, “**Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.**” Caiaphas knew that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God ([John 10:30-33](#)), so he put Him under oath to declare this. He knew that Jesus, while under oath, could not avoid replying to this question.

Jesus did acknowledge that He was the Son of God, “**Yes, it is as you say.**” And then He quoted from 2 different messianic Scriptures: the 1st was [Psalm 110:1](#) which said, “**The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’**” To see the 2nd Scripture, [turn to Daniel 7:13-14.](#) Standing before those skeptics, Jesus’ prediction of His resurrection, His ascension, and His return in glory fell on deaf ears.

Caiaphas had heard enough; “**the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy.’**” He didn’t bother to have the members polled individually but simply called for verbal support of his verdict. In an example of mob reaction, Jesus was sentenced to death. Disregarding the last bit of decorum and decency and demonstrating the wickedness of their hearts, the supreme court of Israel degenerated into a mindless rabble as “**they spit in his face and struck him with their fists.**” This fulfilled the messianic prophesy from [Isaiah 50:6](#): “**I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.**” From beginning to end, this was the ultimate injustice.

III. A Story of Denial

One story that all 4 Gospels record is Peter’s denial of Jesus in the courtyard that separated the houses of Annas and Caiaphas. Although it is a story of a great tragedy, later, after Peter’s repentance and

the Lord's forgiveness, it is also a story of encouragement. Peter's denial may be one of ultimate betrayal, but because of his heartfelt repentance, God was able to use him powerfully in spreading the Gospel.

A. Steps to Failure Peter's denial wasn't a spontaneous response to fear during that early morning in the courtyard, it was the result of a series of steps which lead to failure. Steps that began earlier in evening in [Matthew 26:33](#) when Peter boasted that “**even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.**” He was full of selfish pride. He was overconfident.

The **2nd step** toward his denial was Peter's rejection of Jesus' prediction about his denying Jesus before the next morning dawned. In [Matthew 26:35](#) he said, “**Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.**” In his pride, Peter argued with and rejected the Word of God. The **3rd step** was lack of prayer or his prayerlessness. In the Garden Jesus had warned all of them to “**keeping watching and praying that you may not enter temptation**” ([Matthew 26:40-41](#)). But they felt no weakness and saw no need to be watchful or prayerful. As James wrote in [James 4:2](#), “**You do not have, because you do not ask God.**”

The **4th step** towards Peter's denial was his self-centeredness. Peter felt he knew what was best. Sensing no need to ask the Lord's help or advice, when the soldiers tried to arrest Jesus, Peter drew his sword “**struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.**” It wasn't part of *Peter's* plan that Jesus be arrested. In his self-centeredness, he was ready to defy human and divine authority.

The **5th step** was going where he shouldn't have gone—in this case, the courtyard of the high priest. Jesus had already quoted from [Zechariah 13:7](#) which said that the “**sheep will be scattered.**” Also, in [John 18:8-9](#) when Jesus was arrested by the soldiers, Jesus in so many words told the disciples not to follow when He said, “**Let these men go.**” If Peter had listened to the word and obeyed it, he wouldn't have gone where his faith might be tested beyond his ability to resist. The Lord's promises in [1 Corinthians 10:13](#) not to allow His children “**to be tempted beyond what they are able**” and in [2 Peter 2:9](#) “**to rescue the godly from temptation**” do not apply to willful disobedience. Peter's own pride and self-sufficiency—his will—led him to disregard the Lord's will and to go where he shouldn't have gone. This resulted in his denial of his Lord and Savior.

B. The Denial Since Peter doubted Jesus' predictions, he wanted to see the outcome of Jesus' trial. He should have known what was going to happen because the Lord had told the disciples of it several times. But because of his ego and doubts, he couldn't keep from following the Lord.

By the time Jesus appeared before Caiaphas, it was probably around 1 am. Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard hoping to be unobserved by the crowd of minor officials, soldiers, servants, and other onlookers who had assembled there. Peter was first confronted by a servant girl in the courtyard: “**You also were with Jesus of Galilee,’ she said.”** This was the least threatening of the 3 confrontations—it was directed just at Peter. Peter had stood up against the mob in the Garden, but here, where his own personal safety was threatened, his courage deserted him. He didn’t deny the charge but evaded it by denying to all within hearing that “**I don’t know what you’re talking about.”** Obviously, he missed the chance to declare his allegiance to Jesus.

Then, leaving the warmth of the fires in the openness of the inner courtyard, Peter hid in the cold and shadows of the gateway. But here another servant girl found him. This one spoke out loud for anyone to hear, “**This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.”** Paul’s denial escalated. “**With an oath,**” i.e., something like “*By the name of God*”—Peter denied knowing “**the man.”**

A period of time passed before the 3rd challenge came—**Luke 22:59** says “**about an hour later.”** This time some bystanders intentionally went up to Peter, certain about their identification. “**Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away,”** they said. Peter intensified his own denial by calling down God’s wrath on himself if he were lying as he exclaimed, “**I don’t know the man!”**

C. The Conclusion “**Immediately a rooster crowed.”** The crowing of the rooster reminded Peter of the words of Jesus. The passionate promise he made to stand up for Jesus was held up before him. **Luke 22:61** says, “**The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.”** Jesus’ look of love must have broken Peter’s heart. He knew how phony he was. One denial may be excused but 3 are beyond excuse. “**And He went out and wept bitterly.”**

D. The Encouragement It's not fair or right to leave Peter this way. His actions may have led to a broken-hearted Peter for a short time, but Jesus soon brought encouragement. [Luke 24:33-34](#) and in [1 Corinthians 15:5](#) record that after His resurrection, Jesus met privately with Peter. [John 21:1-19](#) records that later Jesus met the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Here Jesus questioned Peter 3 times about his love for Him—the same number of times Peter had denied his Lord. After Peter had reaffirmed his love, Jesus finished by reinstating Peter as He said, “**Follow me**” ([John 21:15-19](#)).

IV. Application

Both Caiaphas and Peter could not—would not accept the word of the Lord because each man was so controlled by his pride and self-sufficiency that he felt infallible. Both were boastful, defiant against God, prayerless, self-confident, and impulsive. To the best of our knowledge, Caiaphas didn’t learn from his mistakes and never repented. If that’s true, then he went to the place where those who don’t repent and don’t make Jesus their Lord and Savior go—to hell. Peter, however, repented and was forgiven by his Lord. Peter learned from his mistakes and used this knowledge to bring others to His Savior and to help them grow.

Turn to [1 Peter 5:6-11](#). Peter had learned from all his experiences to be ready and alert, always watching for temptation. He had also learned not to trust in himself but to trust in God.

In [2 Peter 2:19](#) Peter wrote, “**A man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.**” Who is your master? Are you like the old Peter or the repentant Peter? Peter learned some important lessons during that difficult experience. He learned to pay attention to God’s Word, to watch and pray, and to put no confidence in his own strength. [Proverbs 3:5-6](#) summarizes all this: “**Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.**” In what or in whom do you put your trust? This Lenten season as we each take time to think of God’s love and Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins, take time to look at your heart, your motives, your attitudes—are you like the old Peter or the new Peter? What will you hear when you stand before the Lamb of God?