

39. The Trial Before the Jews

During our last lesson in this series on the life of Jesus, we saw the arrest of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane by a crowd of people sent by the chief priests and led by Judas Iscariot. Jesus was not hiding. He did not resist. He let himself be led away. And as we will see today, he did not defend himself during the false trial which followed that arrest.

He came into the world to give his life as a sacrifice for sin, but this does not excuse those who condemned him and put him to death. They did not want to understand anything about the mission of Jesus for salvation. They were acting insincerely, out of selfish-interest and jealousy. It was said by the prophet Isaiah that Christ would be put to death without protection and without justice. That is to say, unjustly and without the benefit of a fair and legal trial (Isaiah 53:8). As we will see, this prophecy was fully fulfilled.

Jesus had more than one trial. He was condemned first by the Sanhedrin which was the supreme court of the Jews of that time. Then he was handed over to the Roman authorities to be executed. So let us look at the Jewish trial.

Jesus appeared first before Annas, who was the high priest from the year 6 to the year 15, until he was removed from that post by the Romans. He had four sons and a grandson who succeeded him as high priest, one after the other, but Annas continued to pull the strings and be called high priest. Before the Roman Empire, high priests occupied the post until their deaths, but in the first century, Roman governors had the habit of giving this position to the highest bidder.

The high priest at this time was a big collaborator with the oppressor of the Jewish people. He bought the honor and the power not only with money but also with a close collaboration with Rome. Annas was extremely rich, and he amassed his wealth by exploiting those who came to worship at the temple. He was the greatest beneficiary of the selling of animals in the temple court, a practice which Jesus twice condemned and stopped.

After his appearance before Annas, Jesus was brought, while it was night, to the home of Caiaphas, son-in-law of Annas and the one who officially occupied the position of high priest at that time. With

him were many members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews, composed of priests, scribes and elders of the Jews. After having condemned Jesus, they delivered him to the temple guards who mistreated and scorned him until morning. At dawn, he was led to the place where he would officially meet with the Sanhedrin before being delivered to the Romans.

Here is the story of those three trials, beginning with the arrest in the garden of Gethsemane:

“Then the detachment of troops and the captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound Him... The high priest then asked Jesus about His disciples and His doctrine. Jesus answered him, ‘I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said.’ And when He had said these things, one of the officers who stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, ‘Do You answer the high priest like that?’ Jesus answered him, ‘If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?’” (John 18:13,19-23)

“And those who had laid hold of Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled.” (Matthew 26:57)

“Now the chief priests and all the council sought testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree. Then some rose up and bore false witness against Him, saying, ‘We heard Him say, “I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.”’ But not even then did their testimony agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, ‘Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?’ But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, ‘Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ Jesus said, ‘I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of

heaven.' Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'What further need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?' And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death. Then some began to spit on Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him, and to say to Him, 'Prophecy!' And the officers struck Him with the palms of their hands." (Mark 14:55-65)

"As soon as it was day, the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, came together and led Him into their council, saying, 'If You are the Christ, tell us.' But He said to them, 'If I tell you, you will by no means believe. And if I also ask you, you will by no means answer Me or let Me go. Hereafter the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the power of God.' Then they all said, 'Are You then the Son of God?' So He said to them, 'You rightly say that I am.' And they said, 'What further testimony do we need? For we have heard it ourselves from His own mouth.'" (Luke 22:66-71)

"Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover." (John 18:28)

"And they began to accuse Him, saying, 'We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.'" (Luke 23:2)

THE DISHONESTY OF THE JUDGES

Motivated by jealousy and hate, the Jewish leaders violated the rules of their own system of justice. There was no respect for the law, neither that of God nor of men. Their goal was to destroy Jesus of Nazareth, by whatever means necessary. These are some of their own laws that they violated in the course of the trial.

The rules of the Jewish justice system of that time did not allow a trial to be held at night or for a gathering of the Sanhedrin outside the hall of justice. Preliminary hearings or private interrogations of the accused, such as the one which took place at the home of Annas, were prohibited. No trial could take place on a Sabbath or a holy day; and for a crime that carried a penalty of death, the trial could absolutely not begin on the day before a Sabbath or a feast day,

nor was it permitted to put a condemned person to death the same day he was convicted. It was necessary to allow one night to intervene during which the judges were to sleep, fast, meditate and pray. A second hearing was to take place the next day to review the proceedings of the previous day and to hear new arguments before making each judge vote a second time to confirm the condemnation. During both ballots, each judge was to be questioned individually, beginning with the youngest. The high priest gave his opinion last in order to avoid influencing the decision of the others. A unanimous decision was not allowed in a death penalty case—it would raise suspicion of a conspiracy. You see, there were no lawyers in the modern sense, and it was thought that the accused had to have at least one sympathizer among the judges.

It was forbidden to put the defendant under oath or make him testify against himself. Even a voluntary confession from the defendant was not enough proof if there was no other testimony to confirm it. When witnesses contradicted one another, they were automatically rejected. All of this explains, in part, Jesus' behavior during the trials. According to Hebrew law, it was necessary to reject contradictory testimony and to release the prisoner if his guilt could not be proven. This is what should have taken place in Jesus' case. But instead, the judges, without taking into account the law, turned against the accused and said, "Do you answer nothing?" Jesus said, more or less, "Are you asking me to incriminate myself when our law forbids you to make me? Look for your evidence in a legal way." When a bailiff hits him, he says: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?"

The Sanhedrin condemned Jesus for blasphemy (although they told Pilate that they condemned him for rebellion against the Roman Empire). The greatest fault with their false trial was that they did not examine any evidence proving that Jesus had committed blasphemy in saying that he was the Christ, the Son of God. They didn't try to demonstrate that Jesus was not who he claimed to be. On this point, there was no debate. The Sanhedrin automatically rejected the possibility and proceeded to commit the greatest injustice in the history of the world.

CONCLUSION

If we also refuse to believe in and submit to Jesus,

either because we don't want to change our way of life or because we cling to too many preconceived ideas which don't allow us to objectively examine or even understand the claims of Jesus, then we are as guilty as the Sanhedrin. In our next study, we'll see why the Jewish leaders should have recognized Jesus as the Christ. In the meantime, examine your own heart and be ready to give Jesus a fair hearing.