

Our Lord's Trial Before Caiaphas, and Peter's Denial of the Lord

Matthew 26:57-75

Matthew 26:57-68 - *"And those who had laid hold of Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. ⁵⁸ But Peter followed Him at a distance to the high priest's courtyard. And he went in and sat with the servants to see the end.*

⁵⁹ Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, ⁶⁰ but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward ⁶¹ and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'" ⁶² And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?" ⁶³ But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!"

⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, "He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! ⁶⁶ What do you think?" They answered and said, "He is deserving of death."

⁶⁷ Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, ⁶⁸ saying, 'Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?'"

Background Notes

When we read the different accounts of our Lord's trial in the four Gospels, the details are confusing. We need to remember that there were two trials of our Lord: His religious trial and His civil trial. Furthermore, both trials can be subdivided into three stages.

The three stages of the Lord's **religious trial** were:

1. Before Annas, the former high priest.
2. Before Caiaphas, the high priest at that time.
3. Before the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews.

The three stages of our Lord's **civil trial** were:

1. Before Pilate.
2. Before Herod Antipas.
3. Before Pilate, a second time.

Matthew's Gospel begins his account with the Lord's trial before Caiaphas, which was actually the second stage of His religious trial. The first stage, before Annas, is covered in the Gospel of John: *"Then the detachment of troops and the captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound Him. And they led Him away to Annas first, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year... Then Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest"* (John 18:12-13; 24). So the first stage of the Lord's religious trial was before Annas, and the second stage began when Annas sent Jesus, bound, to Caiaphas.

Annas, by the way, was Caiaphas' father-in-law. Annas was high priest before Caiaphas, and he continued to carry weight in the priestly ranks - so much so, that in the Book of Acts Annas still held the title along with Caiaphas. *"It came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem"* (Acts 4:5-6). So there's no contradiction in the Bible here as far as who was the high priest! Annas was high priest first, then Caiaphas became high priest, but Annas continued to be called the high priest even when Caiaphas became the high priest.

Caiaphas, the ruling high priest at the time of Jesus' trial, has recently been documented by archaeology. A few years ago archaeologists found Caiaphas' ossuary (bone box) outside the ancient city of Jerusalem. The ossuary is now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Once again (as always!) archaeology supports the historical accuracy of the Bible.

Doctrinal Points

1. Caiaphas will answer for his shameful treatment of the Lord.

As high priest, Caiaphas was supposed to be a mediator between God and the people, and Caiaphas was to represent the people before God. Instead, Caiaphas did everything he could, including breaking the law, to eliminate the **true Mediator** between God and man!

First of all, Caiaphas didn't allow any time between Jesus' arrest and trial for a defense to be prepared. In fact, no defense was even allowed. Furthermore, the only witnesses he sought were men who testified **against** the Lord. There was no attempt to obtain witnesses who would testify to the Lord's innocence.

As high priest, Caiaphas was the presiding judge at the trial, and he called the Sanhedrin (the ruling body of the Jews) together as both prosecution and jury. By their own rules, the Sanhedrin was not to meet at night, nor were they to meet at any time during Jewish feast days. Both of these rules were broken at the Lord's trial. There was to be at least a full day before any death verdict was passed. Verdicts were not binding if the Sanhedrin didn't convene in their special meeting place in the Temple area. So, to get Jesus crucified, Caiaphas caused the Sanhedrin to break its own rules.

“Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, saying, “Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?” (v67-68). Caiaphas had the power and the authority to stop such shameful behavior, but he did nothing. Can you imagine this treatment of any defendant in a court of law today - even against a person who had committed a terrible crime? What shameful treatment - and the Lord had committed no crime!

The only charge the religious leaders could find was that Jesus had said that if the Temple was destroyed, He would rebuild it in three days. Notice how they twisted the Lord’s words (v61). The Lord had never said that He would destroy the Temple of God and rebuild it in three days! No, He had said, (speaking of the temple of His body), “Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days.” The false witnesses misquoted the Lord to make it appear that He was plotting to destroy the Temple.

When Caiaphas put the Lord under sacred oath to testify, based on the law in Leviticus 5:1, the Lord said that indeed He was the Messiah, the Son of God. Furthermore, the Lord quoted the Messianic prophesy of Daniel 7, saying, “...*hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.*” In other words, Jesus was saying, “Caiaphas, My glory is veiled now, and it may not look to you like I am the Messiah - but a day is coming when My glory will be revealed. You will no longer be in power then. The Son of Man will be given all power and dominion. You will bow the knee, and submit and answer for your actions of today!” Caiaphas will answer for his shameful treatment of the Lord.

2. Peter was repentant for his shameful denial of the Lord.

Matthew 26:69-75 - *“Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him, saying, “You also were with Jesus of Galilee.”⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you are saying.”⁷¹ And when he had gone out to the gateway, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, “This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth.”⁷² But again he denied with an oath, “I do not know the Man!”⁷³ And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, “Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you.”⁷⁴ Then he began to curse and swear, saying, “I do not know the Man!” Immediately a rooster crowed.⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” So he went out and wept bitterly.”*

Peter had gained access to the courtyard of the high priest’s house, and he was watching the trial from a distance. Earlier that night Peter had promised that he would never deny the Lord, and the Lord told him, “*Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.*” Peter went back on his word and, exactly as the Lord predicted, when he denied the Lord three times. Peter even denied the Lord with an oath - that is, he called down a curse on himself if he wasn’t telling the truth (v72). We might say that we’d never do such a thing, but we shouldn’t be so sure. There’s no knowing what we might say or do if the possibility of crucifixion was staring us in the face!

The bystanders said to Peter, *“Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you”* (v73). Peter’s Galilean accent was different than the accent of Jews from Judea. And at that point, Peter remembered the words that Jesus had spoken to him: *“Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” So he went out and wept bitterly* (v75).

Have you ever wept bitterly because of your sins? When we get to the point of weeping over our sins, the Lord can begin to make some major changes in our lives. We know that Peter’s bitter tears indicated more than just remorse. Peter **repented!**

Repentance involves **resolve** and **change of heart**. Peter went on to become a great apostle for Jesus Christ. He never again denied the Lord. In fact, he died a martyr’s death for the sake of Christ. Tradition indicates that he was likely crucified upside down. Peter was repentant for his shameful denial of the Lord.

Practical Application

We can be silent when we are wronged.

In the midst of the greatest miscarriage of justice in history, the Lord was silent. As Isaiah 53:7 prophesied, *“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.”*

The Lord certainly could have defended Himself. He could have pointed out where His accusers were wrong and unjust, how the witnesses were liars, and how the Jewish leaders were breaking their own laws. But the Lord remained silent until asked, under oath. If He were indeed the Messiah, and then He said, “Yes, I am.”

Why did the Lord remain silent? He did so because He had put Himself and His circumstances into the Father’s hands. We can do the same, even when we’re wronged, because we can be sure that God knows the situation, and **He is in ultimate control**. Now this is not easy, especially when we are stepped on and treated unfairly because we are Christians. But it is possible for us to follow the Lord’s example at this point. We can be silent when we’re wronged.