

**24 Hours That Changed the World:
The Trial Before Caiaphas
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 and Mark 14:53-56, 60-72
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It is after midnight. From where Jesus stood in the Garden of Gethsemane he could look across the Kidron Valley and see the great wall of the Temple where earlier in the week he had taught. The people in the crowds whose adulation rang so loudly in his ears on Sunday were now asleep following their own Passover celebrations. The disciples who had shared his life since he first called them on the edge of a Galilean lake had fled during the chaos surrounding his arrest. Now, bound hand and foot by Temple guards, Jesus was led back toward the city walls.

Jesus shuffled along the mile-long trek, passing again the tombs of the ancient priests and the gates where the Book of Ezekiel says the Messiah will one day place his feet. They passed the Temple, now far below the lofty pinnacle where Jesus was tempted by the devil, who dared Jesus to throw himself to the ground to prove, as angels rushed to his aid, that he was indeed the Holy One. Down the valley they walked; then the guards began pushing and pulling Jesus up the hill of Zion, making their way through the lower City of David, up the long stairway leading to the upper city. Finally, Jesus was led into the house of Caiaphas, the high priest. In the meantime, Peter and John, the same two disciples who had just a few hours earlier prepared the upper room for the Passover feast, mustered enough courage to follow at a distance, hiding in the shadows, distraught and afraid.

Once Jesus was in custody, the Sanhedrin was hastily called to a meeting in the grand hall of what was no doubt a palatial home befitting the high priest. The Sanhedrin was the ruling council of the Jews, made up of 71 elders who were considered to be among the wisest and most pious men of the time. These men ruled over Jewish religious affairs just as the Romans ruled over their political affairs. The Sanhedrin had control of the Temple and the religious courts. They were upstanding men who devoted themselves to the service of God, and their high priest was the leading religious figure of his day.

This ruling council normally met during the day in the Temple courts, and not during high holy feasts like Passover. The fact that they were gathering in the high priest's palace, at night, during the feast of unleavened bread, highlights both

how unorthodox these proceedings were as well as the urgency and secrecy they felt were necessary to deal with Jesus.

It is important for us to pause a moment and take a step back from this scene to recognize its profound significance and appreciate its tragic irony. As Christians, we believe that in Jesus, God walked in human flesh on this earth. He was, in that sense, like an emperor who so wants to know his subjects that he takes off his royal robes, puts on ordinary clothes and lives among them, with no one recognizing or understanding who he is. The God of the universe chose to walk in human flesh as an itinerant preacher, teacher, carpenter, healer, and *pauper*. He healed the sick, forgave sinners, showed compassion to the lost and taught people what God was really like. Please don't miss the irony here: it was not the "sinners" who arrested God when he walked among us. Those who took him into custody and put him on trial were the most pious and religious people on the face of the earth. They were the ones who were in church every week, who carefully observed the Sabbath, who were circumspect in keeping God's law. Yet, the God they claimed to serve walked right in front of them, and they could not see him. They were so blinded by self-righteousness and by their love of power and their fear of losing that power that they missed God entirely.

The people you would most expect to recognize and worship Jesus instead arrested him in darkness and brought him to trial. They accused God of blasphemy. Jesus' testimony that he was, in fact, the Messiah outraged them; and they found him guilty, convicting God of a crime worthy of the death penalty—God blaspheming against himself. They spat on him, blindfolded and mocked him, and beat him, then they turned him over to the guards to beat him again.

The question we are meant to ask, indeed the question we *must* ask, is, "How could this happen?" How could 71 righteous men, dedicated to God, do what these men did? Why did they condemn an innocent man to death? Why would pious men, pillars in the community, spit on him, hit him and mock him?

We probably can't answer those questions in their entirety, but I believe one of the primary reasons for their actions was fear. These men saw Jesus as a threat to their way of life, their positions of authority, their status among their fellow Jews. They had seen the crowds flocking to Jesus and had heard them say, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." (Mark 1:27) Jesus threatened the very social order on which their lives, their livelihoods and their reputations were built.

The reaction of Caiaphas was equal to this perceived threat. We can almost hear him saying, “This man is dangerous. If people continue to flock to him, the Romans are sure to get wind of it and who knows what they’ll do to our people? Better for one man to die than for all the people to suffer. This man has got to go.”

It wasn’t a hard sell to convince the others. Their inherent fear and insecurity worked on them, ate at them, and fear breeds hate which all too often leads to tragic acts of inhumanity. What we see in the actions of the Sanhedrin is not simply about 71 supposedly pious Jewish men in the first century. This is a story about the human condition, about *us*.

Fear is a poison that does its work in all of us. How often are we motivated by fear and the insecurities it spawns? In what ways does it lead us, individually and as a nation, to do what is wrong—what at times is unthinkable—all the while justifying our actions as necessary?

How was fear a part of the Salem witch trials in 1692 or of Joseph McCarthy’s “Red Scare” in 1952? What role did it play in the apartheid laws of South Africa or the Jim Crow laws of the United States? How has it impacted our foreign policy abroad and our immigration policy at home? How has fear led you to do something—or to avoid doing something—you later regretted? Far too often our focus is on what makes us feel secure, but that is barking up the wrong tree. The question we must ask is not “What is the thing that will make me feel most secure?” but “What is the most loving thing for me to do?”

As we become more alert to the power of fear, we also become more aware of the tension between our call to love and the innate fear that exists within each of us. When we read the story of Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, that self-awareness will lead us to ask, “Would I have been one that looked straight into the face of God and didn’t know who or what I was seeing? Would I have been one of those whose fear and insecurity led me to find Jesus guilty of crimes worthy of death?”

I can’t help but wonder if there weren’t at least a few of those 71 who questioned whether putting Jesus to death was the right thing to do. Perhaps some wondered whether he might truly be the Messiah. But, there is nothing in any of the Gospel accounts that indicate that a single one of them, other than Joseph of Arimathea, disagreed when it came to the death sentence they sought from Pilate. And that points to another truth about the human condition: resisting those in authority or those in the majority, even when we believe they are in the wrong, is

exceedingly difficult to do. We don't want to speak up as the lone voice of dissent for fear of appearing foolish or naïve. Perhaps there were people on the Sanhedrin council who later on thought, "Why didn't I say anything?" Group think is a powerful force and we are all vulnerable to it. Maybe one of the invitations in this Lenten journey is to fine-tune our listening skills, so that when God's Spirit says, "speak up!" we will be able to say with great humility and despite our fear, "You know, this just doesn't feel right to me."

At the center of the storm stood Jesus, listening as these "pious" men looked for reasons to put him to death. He saw their growing frustration as the witnesses they brought in to testify against him told varying stories. According to Jewish law, two people had to agree in their testimony in order to convict; and these witnesses could not agree. Finally, they looked at Jesus, and the high priest said, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" All Jesus had to do was stay silent, and there would have been no grounds for conviction. Instead, he answered in the affirmative, and his fate was set.

The final scene in this part of the drama was taking place in the courtyard around a fire where Peter was trying to stay warm. We know what is coming— Peter is going to deny Jesus, an act for which he is still remembered. But, as easy as it is to look down on him for his denial, it is important to recognize the courage Peter has demonstrated up to this point.

When the guards came to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane, it was Peter who drew his sword and showed himself ready to fight a detachment of armed guards. True, his actions were misguided, but he was the one disciple courageous enough to try to defend Jesus.

Peter is also the one who followed the guards as they took Jesus to Caiaphas' house. He clung to the shadows, but when he got there, he plucked up the courage to enter the high priest's courtyard to see for himself what was happening. Put yourself in Peter's position. He risked his own life to walk into that courtyard, something a good many of us might not have been able to do.

Still, Peter's courage lasted only to a point. Warming himself by the fire, he stood among the Temple guards as the trial dragged on, but he was likely doing his best to conceal his identity. When a servant girl started calling attention to him, he began to falter. "You were with that Nazarene, Jesus. I know you were." At that moment, fear took over. Knowing he was in danger of being arrested himself, Peter would not stand up and acknowledge himself as Jesus' disciple.

He denied it once, then a second time, then a third. Calling curses from heaven upon himself, he swore, "I do not know this man you are talking about." At that moment a rooster crowed for the second time, and Peter remembered Jesus' words, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

Luke tells us that at that instant, Jesus looked from inside the hall at Peter and when their eyes met, this rugged lifelong fisherman, this rough and ready leader of Jesus' disciples, broke down and wept.

This incident is one of the few that is mentioned in all four Gospels, so clearly, the Gospel writers considered it important. It wasn't included to embarrass Peter. In fact, the Gospels were written after Peter, too, ended up on a cross for his faith. These writers knew the story because Peter himself must have told the awful truth of that night's events. But, what a testimony it became. When Peter preached, he could say with absolute certainty and integrity, "I know you've denied Jesus. I have too. I denied him in a way and at a time that I deeply regret and am ashamed of, but I can tell you this: I betrayed Jesus, but he gave me grace. He took me back. And if you've denied him, he will take you back, too."

Denial is not just refusing to identify ourselves as Christians. It's failing to speak up for justice and righteousness when we have the chance. It's being more concerned with what others think of us than with what God thinks. It's giving in to peer pressure even when it doesn't feel right. It's giving into fear, worry, or despair rather than trusting in God. We deny and betray Jesus in a thousand different ways, but God's answer for us is always the same: grace and forgiveness.

Peter never again denied Jesus. He became an outspoken evangelist for the cause of Christ. In his story is an invitation to us, too, to be counted among Christ's followers, whatever the cost.

To God be all praise and honor and glory. Amen.