

Message #56

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John

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GOD IN THE DOCK, OR MAN ON TRIAL

JOHN 18:12-27

INTRO AND REVIEW

In the British legal system (PROJECTOR ON--- BRITISH COURT), judges are often referred to as “magistrates.” The place where they sit is the “bench.” The place where defendants sit in criminal cases is referred to as the “dock.” This is the setting for a significant observation that C. S. Lewis once made.

C. S. Lewis was an English literature professor who taught at both Cambridge and Oxford. He was an atheist for many years, but then became a committed Christian. In the 1940s and 1950s he wrote several books which defended the Christian faith. *Mere Christianity* is perhaps the most famous one. In another work, he made this observation (“THE ANCIENT MAN...): **“The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man, the roles are quite reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock...”**

He went on to add, **“He is quite a kindly judge; if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty, and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal.”** (BUT THE IMPORTANT...) He then concludes with this statement: **“But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God is in the dock.”** (*God in the Dock*, Lewis)

In much of the history of Western Civilization, and in much of the rest of the world today, there was general recognition that we human beings are accountable to God, or the gods, however He, or they, may be conceived. But for us who have lived in what is called “the West” in the last century, that attitude has shifted, especially among the leaders of society. We have become the judges. God is in the defendant’s chair, and it is uncertain whether He will be acquitted.

In one segment of our culture, science is on the bench. The theory of evolution has provided a way for life to be explained without the need of a Creator. So God better come up with better scientific evidences to provide a case for His existence. In the social sciences, Sigmund Freud presented a paper a century ago to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in which he concluded that religion is a “universal obsessional neurosis.” In philosophy we are faced with the issues of war and evil and injustice. God needs to come up with a good answer for these problems if we are going to let Him off the hook. With the advent of birth control and abortion and the internet and changed civil laws, we humans have discovered sexual freedom. The Bible has these antiquated restrictions that would limit our sexual behavior to marriage between a man and woman. So God better come up with some pretty good reasons for these laws that would restrict our freedom. Man is on the bench and God is in the dock. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In our ongoing study of John’s Gospel, we have reached the section of the book that deals with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Two weeks ago, at the beginning of #18, we looked at the circumstances involving the arrest of Jesus by the religious authorities. My contention was that the arrest (PROJECTOR ON--- GETHSEMANE CAVE MAP) happened in a cave on the east side of Jerusalem near the traditional olive grove where tourists are taken today. The term “Gethsemane” means “olive press.” Archaeologists have discovered the remains of an olive press in this cave. (GETSEMANE INTERIOR) Also, the earliest religious pilgrims who came to Jerusalem regarded this site as the place where Jesus met with His disciples on the night of His arrest.

We saw two weeks ago that Jewish religious leaders, backed up by Roman soldiers, arrived at this cave where Jesus was hanging out with His disciples after the Passover meal. We saw last week from Richard Hill what spiritual significance is embedded in the Passover ritual. Peter made an effort to provide a defense against these captors. But Jesus displayed His sovereignty over the situation by healing the Jewish official whose ear was cut off and by convincing His captors that He was the only one whom they wanted. So we pick up the story from here.

I.

In vv. 12 -14 of #18, which is found on p. 904 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find that THE CULTURAL ELITES BRING JESUS TO THE DOCK. (I. THE CULTURAL LEADERS BRING...) The Apostle John writes in v. 12, **“So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him.”**

“Band of soldiers” is more literally “cohort.” The reference is to a Roman military unit of several hundred men. The English transliteration of the original term for “captain” is “chiliarch,” which refers to the

commanding officer of a cohort. Whether the entire cohort was here with the chiliarch, we don't know, but one of the other Gospels describes this contingent of Romans and Jewish temple police as "a large multitude."

The Roman cohort was normally stationed at the provincial capital of Judea at Caesarea on the Mediterranean. But at the three biggest Jewish feasts, it was brought to Jerusalem. If Jewish unrest was going to arise, it was likely to happen at one of these feasts. (FORTRESS ANTONIA) The cohort was stationed at the Fortress Antonia, which overlooked the temple compound from the northwest corner. The Jewish religious leaders would have approached the chiliarch here, or perhaps the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, to get assistance in capturing this religious fanatic whom they would have described as a troublemaker.

The binding of Jesus was a standard practice, just as police handcuff suspects today. But a careful student of the Old Testament might also recognize that binding was what was done to some animal sacrifices. (PSALM 118:27) Thus in Psalm 118 v. 27 we read this direction: "**Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!**" This bound Jesus is about to become a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Some of you will also remember the story of Abraham binding his unique son Isaac in fulfillment of God's command to offer him as a sacrifice. The Lord kept that from happening, but now He was offering His own Son. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Mark #14 v. 50 indicates that the disciples ran away when Jesus was taken off. Verse 13 in our passage adds, "**First, they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.**" The New Testament describes Jesus as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. He is the true representative of both God and man. He is being brought before these two men who have the title, but are working for the devil. The name "Annas" comes from a Hebrew word which means "gracious." He proves to be anything but gracious.

The high priests of Israel were supposed to follow a direct line that went back to Aaron. They were supposed to serve in office until they died. Since the Roman occupation of Israel, the governors claimed the authority to appoint the Jewish high priests. (PROJECTOR ON--- HIGH PRIEST CHART) Annas was appointed high priest in 6 AD when Judea became an official province of the Roman Empire. In 15 AD he was removed from office by the governor. Caiaphas was appointed high priest in 18 AD, according to the first century historian Josephus, by the governor who came before Pontius Pilate. Besides son-in-law Caiaphas, Annas had five sons who served as high priest. The suspicion is that he continued to exert much influence even when he was not officially the high priest. The fact that Jesus is taken to Annas first would seem to support that idea.

Any godliness that this family had was superficial. Even the Jewish Talmud, when it was written a couple of centuries later, said this about the family: **“Woe to the house of Annas. Woe to their serpent’s hiss. They are high priests. Their sons are keepers of the treasury, their sons-in-law are guardians of the temple, and their servants beat the people with staves.”** (*Pesahim* 57a) When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, they discovered that this priestly family had amassed a significant fortune. It seems that they had control of the business in the temple. They had a monopoly over the animals that were sold for sacrifice. They controlled the exchange rate for currency that was involved in buying animal sacrifices. They got a financial cut of all of this business. It is these guys, along with the Pharisees, who have put Jesus in the dock.

There were several reasons that they were upset with Jesus. On two occasions this Jesus had kicked animal merchants and money changers out of the temple. He called this business “a den of thieves.” The high priests also had theological issues with Jesus. Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah, even God Himself. The high priests were Sadducees, and Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection from the dead. Jesus preached a resurrection from the dead. Then there was also this story circulating that Jesus actually had raised someone from the dead. These guys felt threatened by this trouble maker.

Back in our text, v. 14 adds, **“It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.”** Earlier in this week there had been a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism, composed of high priests, rabbis--- who were mostly Pharisees, and leading laymen. John #11 v. 50 (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 11:50) records Caiaphas as saying, **“Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.”** Caiaphas was an evil man. He did not realize the spiritual truth that he was speaking. But the Gospel writer John recognized that God was sovereignly using his mouth to utter a true prophetic statement.

Such it is that the cultural elites, religious leaders and civil government leaders, Jews and Gentiles, bring Jesus to the dock.

II.

In vv. 15-18 we find that THE GENUINE DISCIPLE TRUSTS IN HIS OWN RESOURCES. (II. THE GENUINE DISCIPLE...) There is a change of scenes now as the focus shifts to Peter. According to vv. 15 & 16, **“Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter stood outside at the door.**

So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in.”

So Jesus is taken from Gethsemane (GETHSEMANE ANNAS MAP) into the city to the home of Annas. Peter is painfully aware of the promise that he made hours earlier not to desert or deny Jesus. He sought to demonstrate that commitment by taking a swing with his sword at one of the captors at Gethsemane. He and the other disciples fled the cave after that. But now he follows the crowd to the home of the retired high priest.

A natural question arising from these two verses concerns the identity of “the other disciple.” Some suspect that this disciple is a Jesus follower not part of the apostles. He could be from a priestly family, which would explain his connection with the high priest. One difficulty with this view is that the key players in this drama are identified by the Gospel writer. John names people like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and the women at the cross. He identifies apostles of Jesus by name when they play a key role in the story. This guy is just called “the other disciple.”

The Apostle John never refers to himself by name in this Gospel. In #13 v. 23 most commentators recognize that it is John who is in view when the author speaks of the disciple whom Jesus loved. In #20 v. 2, John will later use this same term “the other disciple.” (JOHN 20:2) In this description of the resurrection, John writes, **“So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved...”** The other Gospel writers refer to this same incident and say that it was John who was with Peter when women arrived to proclaim that the tomb was empty. So it seems likely that John is the other disciple with Peter in the courtyard of Annas. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The next question is: How does John, this fisherman from Galilee, know the high priest? There are two possibilities. The first is that the father of John had a significant fishing business by the Sea of Galilee. There is a reference in the other Gospels that he had hired servants. We also know from other Jewish writings that the family of the high priest ate fish. So it could be that the Apostle John’s family was involved in supplying fish for the high priestly family.

The other possibility is that John was related to the high priest. This is a bit complicated, and I won’t go into complete detail. You can reference the verses by looking at the sermon online. It seems likely that John’s mother was Salome (Matt. 27:56; John 19:25). Salome was quite likely the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. (Mark 15:40) Mary was a relative of Elizabeth, who was a descendant of Aaron. (Luke 1:5) So John may have come from a priestly family and may have known the family of high priests

through that connection. Thus it was that he used his influence to get Peter into the courtyard. It was typical for wealthier families to have someone guarding the entrance to the family compound.

According to v. 17, **“The servant girl at the door said to Peter, ‘You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?’ He said, ‘I am not.’”** This servant girl probably knows that John is a Jesus follower. Since Peter wants John to be let into the compound, she naturally suspects that Peter is a Jesus follower, too. But Peter denies it.

How could bold and courageous Peter, I-will-die-for-you-Peter, lie to a simple servant girl? Perhaps he was caught off guard. Perhaps he was expecting a challenge from a religious leader. Perhaps he didn’t want to get into a discussion with a servant when he had more important events to observe. Perhaps it seemed like the easiest course of action to simply deny his connection with Jesus.

We do know from what preceded this that Peter had not made proper preparations for this encounter. We know that he objected to Jesus’ prediction that Peter would deny Jesus. We know that he did not keep watch in Gethsemane, but fell asleep. So he had not made proper prayer preparation. When confronted with the captors, he sprang into action when he should have followed Jesus’ directions and remained still. The underlying problem was that Peter was trusting in his own resources.

That can happen to us, too. We miss witnessing opportunities because we are not spiritually alert. We blow it in ethical situations where it seems easier to tell a white lie than to explain the truth. We get caught up in situations of spiritual conflict and we fall back into relying on our own resources, our abilities, our charm, or our defense mechanisms. What we really need is to call upon divine resources.

Verse 18: **“Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.”** It was spring. Jerusalem is at the same altitude as Boulder City. It is at close to the same longitude as we are. So the climate is similar to what we have. It is usually pleasant in the daytime at this season of the year. But it is chilly at night, if one has to be outside for an extended period of time. (PROJECTOR ON---ANNAS’ HOUSE)

The setting for the events described in our passage may have looked something like this. It was typical for a wealthy guy like Annas to have a courtyard surrounded by a wall with a gate. It was here that capable Peter got into trouble by trusting in his own resources.

III.

In vv. 19-24 the scene changes back to Jesus and His encounter with Annas. THE GOD-MAN IN THE DOCK DEFENDS HIS INNOCENCE. (III. THE GOD-MAN IN THE DOCK...) According to v. 19, **“The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.”** Just as we Americans refer to former presidents of the United States as “President,” so also the Jews of this time referred to previous high priests as “high priest.”

In the Gospel accounts of the examination of Jesus by the authorities, it is clear that there was a religious examination and a civil examination. In putting the four Gospels together, it seems that there were three parts to each one. John has just described an initial hearing before Annas. In v. 24 brief reference will be made to an appearance before Caiaphas. John does not give details about that hearing. The other Gospel writers do. Also there is a formal appearance before the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism. The Apostle John also does not describe that meeting, while the other Gospel writers do.

In these few verses we find out something about what happened in Jesus’ appearance before Annas. A couple of centuries after this, the applications of how religious Jews applied the Old Testament law were finally written down. These writings, which ended up in something called the Talmud, include a description of the proper functioning of the Sanhedrin. They describe how this group, as well as other councils, are to apply civil and criminal law in a Jewish context. Most experts think that these rules were already in force in the time of Jesus, even though they may not have been written down.

As we shall see, the religious leaders violated many of their own laws in their treatment of Jesus. They were not to have trials at night. Defendants were to be presumed innocent. We know that these guys had already decided that Jesus should be killed. Witnesses had to be presented to determine guilt. The first witnesses to be presented were those who sided with the defendant. All of these rules are being violated. Perhaps Annas justified his violation of some of them on the grounds that this was an informal hearing.

Verse 19 says that Annas questioned Jesus in regard to two issues. He wanted to know about His disciples. He may have asked how many there were. Where were they located? What were the requirements to become a disciple of Jesus? What kinds of things did they do? Annas was trying to gauge the extent of the threat that was posed by Jesus. Jesus seems not to have responded to this part of his questioning.

The other area of concern was Jesus' teaching. He has violated the Sabbath law, or at least their interpretation of it, on several occasions. He has caused trouble in the temple on at least two occasions. What was the basis of his authority to think that He could kick money changers and animal merchants out of the temple? What about His claims to be the Messiah? And was Jesus actually claiming to be God? That would be blasphemy.

Verses 20-21 describe His response: **"Jesus answered him, 'I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said.'"**

According to Jewish law, a defendant in this kind of case did not need to say anything. Also the prosecutor was obliged to bring forth witnesses, beginning with witnesses who were favorable to the defendant. Jesus' response here may reflect knowledge of that law. He ignores the first part of the question about His disciples, and He calls upon the high priest to ask for witnesses.

In regard to His teaching, Jesus is not saying that He has never spoken to His disciples in private. That is obviously not the case. Rather He is saying that He has declared His beliefs and doctrine openly. He has explained publicly right in Jerusalem that He is the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. He has made claims about His divine identity such that the Pharisees sought to stone Him.

Verses 22 & 23: **"When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?' Jesus answered him, 'If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?'"** The original Greek verb here for "strike" means to hit with a sharp blow of the flat of the hand.

This is another violation of Jewish law. A defendant was not to be struck until a verdict was given and a sentence announced. This officer was probably a member of the temple police. The first century Jewish historian Josephus says that most defendants cringed and became submissive in the face of such authorities. Such was not the case with Jesus. He seems to be objecting to the treatment He is receiving in violation of Jewish law.

In this there is perhaps a lesson for us. It is not wrong to claim our rights when we are treated unjustly by civil or religious authorities. The Apostle Paul in the Book of Acts appealed to his rights as a Roman citizen on several occasions when he was treated unjustly. At the same time, neither Jesus nor Paul sought to rebel or fight when their legal rights were ignored.

We read then in v. 24, **“Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.”** Some think that the house of Caiaphas was part of this family compound. We don’t know. The Apostle John omits a description of what happened with Jesus before Caiaphas. The other Gospels describe that. Now the action returns to the scene outside.

IV.

In vv. 25-27 we find that THE GENUINE DISCIPLE PROVES HIS OWN INABILITY. (IV. THE GENUINE DISCIPLE...) Verse 25 reads, **“Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, ‘You are not also one of His disciples, are you?’ He denied it, and said, ‘I am not.’”** Either this scene happens when Jesus is still being questioned by Annas, or possibly the accusers have moved to another house in the compound of the high priestly family.

There are several stark contrasts here. Jesus is courageous in his encounter with top officials. Peter is cowardly in his encounter with servants and lower officials. Jesus is innocent of any real crime. Peter could rightly be charged with assaulting an officer. One commentator observes that Jesus stands up to questioners and denies nothing. Peter cowers before questioners and denies everything.

The coolness of the night and the warmth of the fire draw these servants and lesser officials to the fire. Peter wants to blend in with the crowd. But if he stays outside of the fire circle, will he draw more attention to himself? Perhaps he is safer to stay near the fire. It is dark and a charcoal fire does not send out much light. Mark’s Gospel notes that Peter’s words reveal a Galilean accent. Thus Peter is questioned, and thus he denies his connection with Jesus.

Verse 26: **“One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, ‘Did I not see you in the garden with him?’”** The fact that the specific questioner is identified, and the author knows that he is a relative of Malchus, points to the conclusion that the Apostle John is the other disciple mentioned earlier and has knowledge about the high priestly family.

Verse 27: **“Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.”** Thus Peter makes a third denial and fulfills the prophecy that Jesus made about denying Him three times before a cock crows. (JOHN 13:38) Back in #13 v. 38, when Jesus was with His disciples in the Upper Room, this incident is described: **“Jesus answered, ‘Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.’”** Various ideas are expressed by commentators as to the exact hour when this cock crowed, but the main point is that Jesus’ prophecy is fulfilled.

(PROJECTOR OFF) There was a great spiritual battle that was going on in this situation. The devil himself was lurking around. In #13 we were told that he had entered into Judas Iscariot, no doubt to promote the betrayal and eventual death of Jesus. In a situation of great stress and spiritual conflict, Peter did not have the resources within himself to win the battle. He had not taken Jesus’ warning seriously. He did not watch and pray. He attacked when he should have remained still. Most importantly perhaps, Peter had not yet received the Holy Spirit.

The lesson for us is that in the most difficult spiritual battles, we need to resist the temptation to rely upon our own resources. If we have trust in Jesus, we do have the Holy Spirit living within us. But we must depend upon Him and upon our Heavenly Father to know what is right, to have the courage to do the right thing, and to have divine intervention for circumstances over which we have no control.

The other lesson has to do with our attitude toward the God who is there. As with the situation in our passage, God is often on trial in our culture. But from the perspective of eternity, it is we humans who are on trial. These religious leaders received an earthly judgment years later when the Romans came in and wiped out Jerusalem. A more serious final judgment remained for them beyond the grave. As with the Sanhedrin in the first century, the outcome is not good in the end for those of us who place ourselves in the situation of judging the God who is there.

We who are truly Christians no longer have to worry about a judgment of condemnation. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. We have been promised eternal life. The God who is there is not only our Judge but also our loving Heavenly Father.

We do face a judgment of rewards. (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 CORINTHIANS 5:10) In 2 Corinthians #5 v. 10 the Apostle Paul writes to fellow Christians, **“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”** The reality is that God is on the bench, and we are in the dock.

None of this is to mean that we are to be uncritical thinkers. God has given us minds to use. There are many places in the New Testament where Jesus followers are encouraged to think clearly, to pursue truth, to reject falsehood and to cling to that which is right. Some things that happen around us and to us we may never understand on this side of heaven. The story that I told last week about the missionaries to Africa is an example of that.

At the same time, we must approach the challenges and difficult experiences of life with a certain humility. We must always remember that God is on the bench and we are in the dock.