

Exalting Jesus Christ

"The Trials of Jesus – Part 1"

INTRODUCTION:

- I. All of us become outraged when we see justice perverted – when we see courts either convict an innocent man, or acquit someone who is clearly guilty.
 - A. Obviously, a judicial system is only as good as those who are entrusted with guaranteeing justice is truly served.
 1. However, even under the best of circumstances sometimes the innocent are convicted and the guilty go free.
 2. Sadly, that's what we see in the trials of Jesus.
 - B. Over the next two weeks we're going to take a close look at the trials of Jesus – both Jewish and Roman trials.
 1. Fortunately, the Scriptures provide us with a lot of information about those trials.
 2. But I think what will surprise most is to discover how badly the entire judicial system failed when it came to the trials of Jesus Christ.
 3. What we're going to discover in this lesson, and in the two to follow, is that every principle of fairness and every standard of

justice was cast aside to convict Jesus and ensure that He would die on a Roman cross.

C. And so, let's continue our studies through the gospel of John entitled "Exalting Jesus Christ."

1. Let's go back to the eighteenth chapter of John, and begin our examination of "The Trials of Jesus – Part 1."

BODY:

I. Under Jewish law, cases involving the death penalty were conducted by the Great Sanhedrin.

A. The Bible doesn't say much about the Sanhedrin, but there are two Jewish writings that tell us how the Sanhedrin functioned.

1. These are the *Mishna* which contains the traditional oral interpretations of Scripture, and the other is the *Tosefta* which is a commentary on the Mishna.

2. When we examine these two documents and compare them to the way the Sanhedrin acted during the trial of Jesus, one thing clearly emerges - there was a gross miscarriage of justice!

a. The Jewish authorities were so determined to see Jesus put to death that they simply cast aside every legal precedent and every law that would have found Him innocent of any crime.

4. So, let's take a closer look at the Great Sanhedrin and learn how it should have functioned in the case against Jesus.
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- II. The Sanhedrin was the supreme court of the Jews in the days of Jesus.
 - A. It was composed of seventy-one members, or judges.
 1. That's because this was the number of judges Moses appointed to aid him in his task of handling disputes between the children of Israel. **(cf. Numbers 11:16)**
 2. The seventy-first member of the Sanhedrin was the High Priest, who presided over all meetings of the Sanhedrin.
 - B. It was a judicial body made up of Scribes and Pharisees, Sadducees, Priests, and the Elders of the people.
 1. Unfortunately, these were also the same groups that had become the bitterest enemies of Jesus.
 - a. So, from the very beginning, Jesus was obviously at a distinct disadvantage in finding justice in this court.
 - C. But, what many find surprising is that under Jewish law the Sanhedrin was actually mandated to act as counsel for the defense.
 1. Even when it appeared that the man was clearly guilty of the crimes he was charged with, the Sanhedrin was supposed to

diligently search to find some way to acquit the man and find him innocent.

- a. In fact an ancient Jewish writing stated, "The Sanhedrin which condemns to death one man in *seven* years is accounted murderous."
 - b. And even then, another great rabbi argued, "the Sanhedrin that condemns to death one man in *seventy* years is to be considered murderous."
 - c. But two other well-respected rabbis' wrote that the Sanhedrin should never condemn a man to death.
- D. Even the way the Sanhedrin produced and questioned witnesses was designed to protect the accused.
1. Jewish law from the days of Moses had always required a minimum of two witnesses to condemn an accused.
 - a. **Deuteronomy 17:6** – *Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness.*
 2. Under Jewish law, witnesses were not only examined openly before the public to allow anyone to challenge their testimony, they were also examined separately to prevent them from hearing the testimony of other witnesses.

3. If their testimony varied over any essential and material facts of the case, their testimony was disregarded, and the accused was automatically acquitted.
- E. Witnesses, in capital cases, were compelled to be present throughout the entire trial.
1. As the trial commenced all the witnesses were reminded of what God told Cain after he killed his brother Abel:
 - a. **Genesis 4:10** – God said, "... *The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground.*"
 - b. Witnesses were told that the word "blood" in this passage is plural and literally means "bloods."
 - c. In other words, their testimony would not simply condemn the accused to death, but all future generations that might have come from him.
 2. And finally, if the accused was found guilty and condemned to die by stoning – the most common form of execution among the Jews - those who testified against the accused were to be the first to cast stones.
- IV. When the Sanhedrin met in the Hall of Hewn Stone, an absolute minimum of twenty-three judges were required to be present.

- A. Civil matters could be tried and ended the same day, however, capital cases were different:
 - 1. The only way a capital trial could begin and end on the same day was if the accused was found innocent and acquitted.
 - a. The accused would then be released immediately.
 - 2. However, if the accused was found guilty, the sentence could not be handed down until the following day.
 - a. The members of the Sanhedrin were required by their own rabbinic law to spend the entire night in meditation and prayer, trying every way possible to find the accused innocent of his crime so that he could be set free.
 - a. This is why a capital case could never take place at night or on the day before the Sabbath, or any great feast day.
- B. When a trial began, it always began with the arguments for the Defense – arguing for the acquittal of the accused.
 - 1. Trials never began with the Prosecution bringing charges before the court.
 - 2. Rather, the Defense was given the first opportunity to show to the court reasons for the accused being acquitted and released.

- C. Furthermore, in all capital trials the accused could not be found guilty on the basis of his own testimony – he could not be found guilty on the basis of self-incriminating evidence.
 - 1. The evidence which might convict a man had to come from the testimony of others – never from something the accused said.
 - 2. In fact, it was illegal to even ask questions that might lead to self-incrimination.
 - a. One leading rabbi wrote, "Our law condemns no one to death on his own confession."
 - b. Another wrote, "It is a fundamental principle with us that no one can damage himself by what he says under trial."
- D. And finally, in all capital cases a man could never be condemned by a unanimous vote.
 - 1. A man could be acquitted by a unanimous vote, but never convicted. There had to be at least one vote for acquittal!
 - a. It was said a unanimous vote was the sign of an unfair trial, and therefore invalidated the whole process.
 - b. If the verdict was unanimous, the whole proceedings were declared a mistrial and the accused was automatically acquitted.

- E. Ironically, under the Jewish judicial system the accused was guaranteed full and complete protection against false imprisonment, false witnesses or any other injustice.
 - 1. The accused was not even to be considered on trial until the testimony of the witnesses had been examined and confirmed.
 - a. This meant that a man could not even be incarcerated until every witness had been examined, and their testimony was ruled relevant and material to the case.
 - b. Jesus raised this very point when He was illegally questioned by Annas, the former High Priest – as we will see in a moment.
 - 2. Sadly, Jesus was not only arrested and dragged in chains through the streets of Jerusalem in the pre-dawn hours, He was condemned before He ever had a chance to stand trial.
 - 3. This terrible miscarriage of justice began at the moment Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.
 - 4. So, now that we understand how the legal system should have worked in the trials of Jesus, let's see what actually happened.

- V. The first trial of Jesus actually began shortly after His arrest when He was brought before Annas.

A. The gospel of John tells us:

1. **John 18:13-14** – *And they led Him away to Annas first, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year. 14 Now it was Caiaphas who advised the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.*
2. In the days of Jewish independence (before Roman occupation) High Priests were appointed for life.
3. But following Roman occupation, the office of High Priest often became a pawn in games of political intrigue and power.
4. Therefore, to prevent High Priests from gaining too much power, Rome frequently demanded that the Jews appoint a new man to serve in the office of High Priest.
5. In fact, High Priests came and went so often that Tiberius once said High Priests came and went, "like flies on a sore."

B Although Annas was no longer the acting High Priest, he was clearly the power behind the office.

1. He exercised such tremendous power because:
 - a. Four of his sons had already served as High Priests, and others were waiting in line to serve in the future.
 - b. And the current High Priest was his own son-in-law, Caiaphas.

- C. We're not told why Jesus was first brought before Annas in the pre-dawn hours, but we can probably speculate.
1. If you remember, just days earlier Jesus had entered the city of Jerusalem amid the shouts of the people who were proclaiming:
John 12:13 – *"Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' The King of Israel!"*
 2. The next day Jesus returned to the temple and drove out the moneychangers and all those who were buying and selling sacrificial animals.
 3. It just so happens that those moneychangers and merchants were doing business in the temple by the permission of Annas.
 - a. Of course, these moneychangers and merchants made a small fortune during Passover.
 - b. Therefore, they not only paid rent for the privilege of setting up shop in the temple courtyards, they were also required to pay a tax, or commission, on all those enormous profits.
 - c. That money went to Annas.
 4. So, when Jesus drove the moneychangers and merchants out of the temple, He was essentially declaring war on Annas and his entire family of corrupt priests.

5. Since Annas was the driving force behind the plot to arrest Jesus, maybe he wanted to be the first to see Jesus in chains so he could gloat over the downfall of this presumptuous Galilean.
- D. While some commentators don't see the appearance of Jesus before Annas as a trial, the fact remains that Annas was clearly looking for evidence to make the case against Jesus stronger.
1. **John 18:19-21** – *The high priest then asked Jesus about His disciples and His doctrine. 20 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. 21 Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said."*
 - a. Remember, under the Jewish legal system no one had a legal right to question the accused about anything until the testimony of every witness had been taken and ruled credible.
 2. **John 18:22-24** – *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?" 23 Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?" 24 Then Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.*

3. The Jewish legal system not only prevented a man from being tried until all the testimony of witnesses had been examined and confirmed, it also prohibited the accused from being mistreated or physically abused.
 4. Obviously, the indignities Jesus would suffer this night were only just beginning.
- VI. But while Jesus was being dragged in chains from place to place, another story was unfolding.
- A. When Jesus had been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, all His disciples fled into the night.
1. But, as Jesus is taken to the former High Priest Annas we find Peter and John close behind.
 - a. **John 18:15-18** – *And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. 16 But Peter stood at the door outside. Then the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to her who kept the door, and brought Peter in. 17 Then the servant girl who kept the door said to Peter, "You are not also one of this Man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not."*

18 Now the servants and officers who had made a fire of coals stood there, for it was cold, and they warmed themselves. And Peter stood with them and warmed himself.

- B. Three years earlier, when Jesus met Peter for the first time, the Lord saw something in this Galilean fisherman that perhaps no one else had noticed.
1. When Andrew brought his brother Peter to Jesus, we're told: **John 1:42** – . . .*Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas" (which is translated, A Stone).*
 2. Unlike what Jesus had done when He first met the other disciples, Jesus gave Simon a name that obviously reflected the inner qualities Jesus had seen – the qualities of courage, strength and loyalty.
 - a. *"You shall be called Cephas" (which is translated A Stone).*
- C. A year later, the steadfastness of Peter was seen when droves of people were deserting Jesus.
1. **John 6:67-69** – *Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" 68 But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 Also we have*

come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

- D. And, just a few months later Jesus and His disciples were going through the towns in the region of Caesarea Philippi.
1. As they were walking along the road, Jesus stopped to go off by Himself to pray alone.
 - a. Luke picks up the story: **Luke 9:18-20** – *And it happened, as He was alone praying, that His disciples joined Him, and He asked them, saying, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" 19 So they answered and said, "John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again." 20 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said, "The Christ of God."*
 - b. Peter's response in Matthew's account is even more emphatic: **Matthew 16:16** – *Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*
- E. Peter's rock-solid devotion to Jesus was seen again, just hours before the Lord was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.
1. In the upper room, as Jesus was trying to explain to His disciples that He was going away and they couldn't follow, Peter once again affirmed His undying devotion to the Lord.

- a. **John 13:37** – *Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake."*
 - b. Mark's account is even more bold: **Mark 14:29** – *Peter said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be."*
 2. But Jesus replied:
 - a. **John 13:38** – *"Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times."*
- F. Let's go back to John chapter 18 to pick up the story again.
1. As Jesus was being interrogated by Annas, we're told:
 - a. **John 18:17-18** – *Then the servant girl who kept the door said to Peter, "You are not also one of this Man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." 18 Now the servants and officers who had made a fire of coals stood there, for it was cold, and they warmed themselves. And Peter stood with them and warmed himself.*
 2. After Jesus was sent to Caiaphas, the acting High Priest, we read:
 - a. **John 18:25-27** – *Now Simon Peter stood and warmed himself. Therefore they said to him, "You are not also one of His disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not!" 26 One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of him whose*

ear Peter cut off, said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" 27 Peter then denied again; and immediately a rooster crowed.

3. Luke's account adds some heart-breaking details about this moment:
 - a. **Luke 22:60-62** – *Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. 61 And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." 62 So Peter went out and wept bitterly.*

VII. What could possibly cause a man of such strength and courage to suddenly deny the very Lord he had so confidently affirmed?

- A. I think there are two reasons why Peter's courage failed – and sadly, it's the same two reasons why our courage sometimes fails us.
 1. After the arrest of Jesus, it suddenly became very dangerous to be His disciple – everyone feared the same thing might happen to them.
 2. But as Peter stood warming himself by the fire, he suddenly found himself standing all alone in the wrong crowd.

- a. The last thing he wanted was to be recognized as a follower of Jesus Christ.
3. But when the others became suspicious and asked Peter time and time again if he was a disciple of the Lord, Peter finally cracked and denied Jesus once... twice... and finally, three times!
- B. So, what caused Peter's courage to suddenly collapse – and how can the same thing happen to us?
 1. First, when we're struggling with our faith, and yet we convince ourselves we're strong, there is a good chance our confidence will crumble when it's put to the test.
 - a. Everyone struggles with their faith from time to time – everyone!
 - b. Those times almost always come when we've experienced a sudden setback – the loss of a job, the loss of our health, the loss of a loved one.
 - c. That's what happened to Peter. Suddenly, without any warning, Jesus had been arrested, bound like a common criminal and led away by His enemies.
 - d. Peter's faith – along with the faith of the other disciples – had suddenly faced its greatest challenge.

- e. It's times like this when we need to honestly admit we're struggling with a weakening faith.
 - f. It's at times like this when we need to quit faking it and call out for help – help from the Lord, and help from our brothers and sisters in Christ.
2. And second, the more we find ourselves surround by worldly people, the easier it is to blend in – and the more we blend in, the more we become like them.
- a. The Lord doesn't ask us to isolate ourselves from the world – if we did, how could we possibly lead the lost to Christ?
 - b. But what He does ask of us is never begin being a friend of the world, or loving the world.
 - c. Perhaps you're thinking, "I don't love the world!"
 - d. But let me ask: who do you socialize with most; who are your closest friends; who are the ones you enjoy being around most?
 - e. If they're all people of the world – people who have little or no interest in Jesus Christ – then you're in more danger than you realize.

- f. You're not just a friend of the world, you're actually moving closer and closer to loving the world more than you love the Lord and the Lord's people.
- g. No wonder you find it so easy to blend in. No wonder you find yourself talking the way they talk, going to the places they go, and doing the things they do.
- h. The last thing you want is for someone to come up to you and say, "You're one of Jesus' disciples, aren't you?"

CONCLUSION:

- I. I've probably touched a tender nerve or two by the things I've just said. But unless you feel the pain, what's going to motivate you to change?
 - A. That moment of realization is what forced Peter to come face-to-face with his real self.
 - 1. When Peter was with the Lord, he was strong, bold and courageous.
 - 2. But the moment he found himself standing all alone surrounded by the Lord's enemies, Peter's faith failed – it crumbled.
 - B. But here's the good news. The God we serve, and the Jesus we claim as Lord and Savior, delight in offering second chances.

1. The Lord didn't give up on Peter, and neither will He give up on you.
 - a. Despite all the times you've failed in the past, He stands ready to offer you a second chance... or a third... or a fourth... or whatever the number may be.
- C. So, you see, you're probably more like Peter than you realize.
 1. Maybe some of you, like Peter, are following the Lord from a distance – afraid to step forward and make a commitment.
 - a. Don't let fear keep you from all the rewards and blessings you can receive not only in this life, but also in the life to come.
 - b. Come to Christ today in complete faith, repenting of your sins, confessing Him as the Christ, and be buried with Him in baptism for the remission of your sins.
 2. And for others, maybe like Peter you've denied the Lord – perhaps not openly as he did, but more subtly by blending in with the world so that no one even knows you're a Christian.
 - a. If you don't step out of the shadows and boldly proclaim to your friends that you are a follower of Jesus Christ, what's going to happen to all those friends when they stand before the Lord in judgment?

- b. So don't let fear stand between you and the joys of serving the Lord now, and bliss of living with Him forever in the future.
- c. Don't turn down the Lord's offer of another chance.