JESUS’ TRIAL AND PETER’S DENIAL

Matthew 26:57-75

Key Verse: 64

“‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied. But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’”

In the last lesson, Jesus prayed at Gethsemane to obey the will of God – that is to take the cup of God’s wrath by dying on the cross as a sin offering for the salvation of mankind. Through this prayer Jesus was ready for his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Today’s passage is about Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish ruling council and Peter’s denial of Jesus.

At this time it is good to know the Jewish system of jurisprudence and law and judgment. The system was predicated on one Old Testament passage, primarily, on Deuteronomy 16:18-20, which says, “Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bride blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.” Throughout the history of the Jewish people, this word of God has been the undergirding sense of justice and judgment as a standard for their system of jurisprudence. However, in the case of Jesus’ trial we will see how illegal and unjust it was, and yet how it demonstrated his holy, perfect majesty.

In Jewish society, in any group of 120 men who were head of families, they would have a Sanhedrin, a council that sat together. The council would be made up of 23 men. These 23 men would be taken from the elders of the village.  They acted as judges and jury in all matters. Now, in Jerusalem, which of course was the capital city, the great religious center of the life of Israel, there was what was called the Great Sanhedrin – the Great Council. This was composed most likely of 70 men who were 24 chief priests, 23 elders, 23 scribes plus the high priest making the number 71. They were the final court for appeal as the Supreme Court level in Jerusalem. They were the highest and ultimate ruling body in Israel. They were chosen from the lesser councils.

The Sanhedrin in terms of criminal procedure, guaranteed to a person who was under prosecution three primary things: the public trial, the right of self-defence and the need of two or three witnesses for the conviction. We see that in the case of Jesus the Jews violated all these and many more, so the trial of Jesus Christ is the most unjust trial in human history, the trial of the only innocent person who ever lived. And false witnessing was so serious a crime, that anyone who gave false testimony was punished with the very penalty the false witness sought to bring upon the person he witnessed against. Deuteronomy 19:18-19a says, “The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother…”

Let’s examine the trial of Jesus described in this gospel according to Matthew. Verse 57 says, “Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled.” It was in the very middle of the night and the arresters brought Jesus to the residence of the high priest which was not to be done. According to the law it had to be during the day, public, and in the Hall of Judgment, which was in the temple complex. From the beginning stage for the trial the Jews ignore their laws in dealing with Jesus. And according to John 18:12 he was bound, even as Isaac was bound to be sacrificed.

Then in verses 58-59 it says, “The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.” It is interesting they were looking for false evidence against Jesus. Why? For they had already planned to kill Jesus, the innocent one. It was written in 26:3, “Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him.” They knew that Jesus was innocent. He was a perfect person.  He was the perfect God in human flesh, and perfection violates nothing.  So there was never a crime.  He never did anything wrong, ever. Then the only way to kill an innocent man was to find false witnesses who could give false testimonies about Jesus. With the death penalty predetermined, they were looking for false evidence. What an odd jurisprudence!

Then verse 60 says, “But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared. ‘This fellow said, “I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.”’” When we refer to John 2:19, this is not what Jesus said. In John 2, when Jesus cleared the temple, the Jews demanded him, questioning, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” At this Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” Then the author John commented, “But the temple he had spoken of was his body.” We see how the Jews distorted the words of Jesus, which Satan always does from the beginning. According to Mark 14:59, even this was a false testimony and did not agree. There was no normal procedure of prosecution. Then in verse 62, the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” The judge should not demand the accused to answer such a question. This violates the law. For the Sanhedrin was a jury and a judge, not a prosecutor.  And they were not to invent a crime.  They were not to invent a prosecution.   They were not to originate charges.  They could only investigate charges that had been brought. Yet, in his desperation, the high priest did not let this testimony go, the testimony which seemed to contain partly truthful words of Jesus. He took hold of it as the only testimony to bring an indictment against Jesus.

Verse 63a says, “But Jesus remained silent.” It was said that the law did not permit the death penalty as a sentence for a sinner by his own confession. He had to be accused by others, and proven guilty by others.  So Jesus said nothing, remaining silent. Furthermore, there was nothing for Him to defend himself against, because there was no accusation that had been made legitimately, and so Jesus stood there silent. Still, Jesus’ silence was more than that. He stood silent in majesty, looking into the eyes of Caiaphas, and no doubt gazing at the other men who were around Him.  He stood there resolutely headed for the cross, knowing this was his hour to die for the sins of the world.  No need for retaliation.  No need for vindication.  No need for self-defence.  Caiaphas must have continued badgering him to say something, but Jesus continued silent.  The silence of Jesus was not the silence of guilt.  It was the silence of innocence.  It was the silence of dignity.  It was the silence of majesty.  It was the silence of integrity.  It was the silence of trust. 1 Peter 2:23 says, “…he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” Our lives can be graceful when we learn the silence of Jesus, the silence of trust.

The high priest could not bear Jesus’ silence and said, “I charge you under an oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” The high priest looked very serious when he said, “I charge you under an oath by the living God.” However, in fact he was covering up his duplicity with such seeming graveness. And the question, “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God”, was an obvious and dangerous leading question which had not to be asked! The question was about Jesus’ identity. So Jesus replied, “Yes, it is as you say”, although Jesus knew his answer would cost him his life.

Jesus spoke further, “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” This answer of Jesus is truly remarkable. His life would be gone that very day, but Jesus spoke about the future. His sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One indicates that he looked to his death and resurrection and ascension. His coming on the clouds of heaven is the undeniable description of the Christ depicted by the prophet Daniel written in Daniel 7:13, “In my vision at night I looked, and here before me was on like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven.” It signifies that Jesus would come back in power and glory as the Judge. This is what Jesus has said to his disciples in two days before in the Olivet discourse, “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” (Mt 24:30). Caiaphas as the high priest, surely would know this prophecy of Daniel. Now he was the judge that was trying Christ Jesus but it would be reversed and he would be judged by the Judge of all, the true Judge. What an irony! He would stand before the great white throne judgment and be thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur if he would reject Jesus to the end (Rev. 20:11-15). Truly in history no one could give such an answer to the judge at the time of trial. Jesus was not only unafraid of the death sentence but also spoke of the eternal destiny of the human judge by the true and ultimate Judge. This was not only applied to Caiphas, but to all those who reject him. There are many who reject Jesus and condemn him in their hearts. Many try to get rid of Jesus in their lives and in the society. They can do so temporally, but they cannot escape the final judgment by the true and ultimate judge. Someday, they will all stand before him to be judged for their eternal destruction.

At this point the high priest had to be serous about his life and think of the truthful statement of Jesus, but he rejected everything that is true only to get rid of Jesus. Verse 65 says, “Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” He mentioned “blasphemy” two times. Yet, what Jesus spoke was not the blasphemy, but the truth. The fear of God had already gone from Caiaphas. His conscience had been seared. Although the judge had not to condemn the accused by his own words, Caiaphas did not want to lose this opportunity to condemn Jesus to death with blasphemy. He tore his clothes as if he had holy sorrow and anger, though the high priest was not to tear his clothes except in the case of God being truly dishonoured (Leviticus 21:10). In fact, he was happy because Jesus could now be executed. He was joyous, but he put on a little play, tearing his clothes theatrically. Surprisingly the all the Sanhedrin members present agreed in condemning Jesus with blasphemy, saying, “He is worthy of death.” They were truly blasphemous, worthy of eternal death. It was a mad mob, screaming for his blood. No vote, no careful vote. No scribe to tabulate. This was mob rule, though this was the highest Jewish ruling council. We see that the whole nation was rotten, and Jesus was tried in such a lethal atmosphere.

Verse 67 says, “Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fits. Ohers slapped hm and said, ‘Prophesy to us, Christ. Who hit you?’” How humiliating it was with spitting, striking and slapping! Jesus could have spit back at them and the hands of striking and slapping him paralyzed. Yet, he did not do so. Rather he bore the humiliation as the Son of God surely in our place. We are the ones who had to be spit, stricken and slapped because of our sins. God should spit in my face, and punch me, and slap me, but Christ took my place. He was tried, condemned to be executed in my place for the salvation of my soul. Praise Jesus! In this grace of Christ Jesus, we are to die to sin and live for righteousness, striving to do what is right at each time. It was to follow our Lord Jesus, the way of humiliation and the cross.

Now let’s think about Peter’s denial. It is written in all four gospels along with Jesus’ trial. It is written in detail. Let’s see this. Look verse 58. “But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.” What an interesting expression that Peter followed him at a distance! We cannot ignore Peter’s remaining loyalty that he showed his appearance, while all others did not. However, this was an obvious step of his bitter failure. And he sat down with the guards to see the outcome. It was mingling himself in the grey colour with those who were not on the side of Jesus. Peter was there to see the outcome, good or bad, with no assurance of absolute goodness in following Jesus. There seems to be many who follow Jesus at a distance, with just half devotion. They are ready to turn away when they cannot see any practical benefit according to their calculation. Actually that’s a pitiful Christian life.

Let’s see what comes to Peter. Verse 69 says, “Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him, ‘You also were with Jesus of Galilee,’ she said. But he denied it before them all. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he said.” This first temptation or test came all of a sudden by a slave girl, not by a temple police, and the first denial was done in a moment. Maybe Peter thought that’s it with no more temptation and denial, and it did not seem to be a big deal to him. He just wanted to escape the situation momentarily.

Yet, it was not so. It was followed by the second. Verse 71 says, “Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, ‘This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.’” This time the talk was not direct to him, but indirect. He denied it again, with an oath: “I don’t know the man!” The denial seemed to be stronger. He denied any relationship with Jesus, despite the beautiful relationship he had had with Jesus for the past three years. When Peter said, “I don’t know the man,” the second denial was done.

Verse 73 says, “After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, “Surely you are one of them, for you accent gives you away.” The temptation went through even the third round. It was after a little while, (about one hour later according to Luke 22:59). This time, a group of people questioned him, assuring that Peter was one of them with the evidence of his Galilean accent. What was Peter’s response? Verse 74 says, “Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know the man!’” The three times of denial meant a complete denial. What a miserable failure as a disciple of Jesus! Surely it could have been the end of his life as a disciple of Jesus. Peter might have thought that. This was the bitter result of his self-dependence, overconfidence, following Jesus at distance and prayerlessness, ignoring Jesus’ warning, “Watch and pray.”

Yet, in God’s merciful providence it was not the end of Peter’s life. What happened next? The Scripture says, “Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.” What a moment of grace! What a crowing of the rooster! What a fulfillment of the words of the Lord Jesus’ prediction! What a remembrance of the words of the Lord! What a repentance! Peter’s three times of denial was terrible, yet he did not deny the fact of his denial. He admitted his terrible sin, which was important in one’s repentance. However, what truly led him to repentance was the remembrance of the words of Jesus! Of course, more fundamentally it was by God’s grace. What we learn is the importance of remembering the words of God. Although at usual time, Bible study does not seem to be effective, at a critical time the word of God can work. We can rely on the very words of God for ourselves and others. We can entrust our loved ones, our children and God’s flock of sheep, not to any other things, even good education, but to the words of God. This was the reason Jesus spoke the word. This was also what Paul did (Ac 20:32).

We see that the life of Peter’s restoration was truly great. He said in 1 Peter 5:8-9, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.” He knew the battle in the spiritual realm and taught us how to fight this battle. He also said in 1 Peter 4:7, “The end of all things are near. Therefore be clear-minded and self-controlled, so that you can pray.” And he told God’s people to positively participate in the suffering of Christ Jesus, not following him at a distance. He said in 1 Peter 4:13, “Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

We thank Jesus our Lord who was tried in our place going through the most unjust and cruel judgment and all the humiliation silently yet showing his holiness and majesty as the Son of God. He is our Savour and the Judge. In this grace of our Lord Christ Jesus, may we closely follow him, undergoing any trial with him and truly serve his purpose of saving souls and calling other followers of Christ Jesus in our time.