THE TRIAL OF JESUS

Luke 22:63-23:25

Key Verse: 23:25

“He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.”

In the last two lessons we thought of Jesus who earnestly prayed on the Mount of the Olives and with anguish, until his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. This was his vivid spiritual battle to obey the will of God with the prayer, “not my will, but yours be done.” He told to his disciples repeatedly, “Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.” After praying, Jesus was ready to be arrested. While Jesus was led and taken into the house of the high priest to be tried before the Sanhedrin, Peter disowned Jesus three times. At such a painful time, the Lord Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter, which led Peter to remember the words of the Lord and repent in bitter weeping. He is truly the Lord of hope, always hoping, trusting, protecting and persevering. In today’s passage, Jesus was tried before the Sanhedrin, before Pilate and Herod, and again before Pilate. In this sequence of trials in a short period of time, probably about one hour, Jesus was sentenced to death and handed over to be crucified. Meanwhile a prisoner, Barabbas, was released. At that moment the will of the evil one prevailed. Yet in it. God’s will prevailed to release sinners by the substitution of his own Son. And we see that in these trials, Jesus identified himself before human judges as the Christ, the Son of God and the king of the Jews. In this astonishing truthful identification of Jesus, the human judges were in fact tried before him, for according to their dealing with Jesus, their eternal destiny would be set. This is applicable to everyone in this world. Let’s survey the deep meaning of Jesus’ trial presented by Luke.

In verses 63-65 it says, “The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. They blindfolded him and demanded, ‘Prophesy! Who hit you?’ And they said many other insulting things to him.” This was after the night trial of the Sanhedrin in the house of the high priest. Jesus was treated so badly, being mocked and beaten, blindfolded to be ridiculed to prophesy who hit him. What mockery and derision to the Son of God! They said many other insulting things to him, blaspheming him.

The night hearing was illegal, and the court meeting in a private house was also illegal. Yet to give the appearance of legality/justice to what they decided, the religious leaders convened again at daylight, probably around 5am. Verse 66 says, “At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them.” In NASB, it is translated to “When it was day, the Council of elders of the people assembled, both chief priests and scribes, and they led Him away to their council chamber.” For the first time, they went to the right place to have, what looks like, a legal trial.

In verse 67 they said, “If you are the Christ, tell us.” They were judges as the members of the supreme court, but they were speaking as prosecutors. And a leading question like this was not to be asked. Yet, they raised such a question out of desperation because there was no evidence of being guilty, no indictment, no charge. Luke even did not write about false witnesses coming forward and speaking as Matthew and Mark did. Anyway, Jesus answered, “If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer.” Jesus seemed to be saying, “You’re not here for a trial. You’re not here for the truth and you’re not here to deal with evidence. Let’s just get that straight.” Jesus knew that it was an unjust court and let them know this. With the aforethought of getting rid of Jesus, they were not interested at all in what was just and true.

However, Jesus had to speak a shocking remarkable truth: “But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.” Regardless of how they judged Jesus, the Son of Man would be seated at the right hand of the mighty God through his resurrection from the dead and ascension. And they would stand before him and be judged according to how they treated Jesus. This judgment would determine their eternal destiny. In truth, each of the Sanhedrin members was there to be tried before Jesus. At this supreme court of Israel Jesus spoke the truth as an ultimatum for their eternal fate. We are reminded of John 15:22, “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however they have no excuse for their sin.” It will be good of us that our life is a trial to be tried before the Judge. Our words, deeds and even thought are tried each day before him. What we say, and what we do and what we think matter in our daily life. Especially how we respond to the words of God we hear is truly significant. Jesus said in Mark 4:24, “Consider carefully what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” We hear the words of God, not human words. May we be aware that life is indeed a trial.

Even hearing such an ultimate statement that the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God,”, their consciences were not stricken at all. Rather they all were resistant, and they asked, “Are you the Son of God?” Jesus replied, “You are right in saying I am.” Jesus was consistent in speaking the truth regarding himself. Then they said, “Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips.” That’s it to them. That’s it to Jesus also, for he spoke the ultimate word.

In court, the accused could incriminate himself and so not to be judged according to what they said. As for Jesus, he spoke what was absolutely true. However, making use of Jesus’ words, they made a verdict to put Jesus to death. And no capital crime could be tried on the day before a feast or a feast day, but in Jesus’ case, it was carried out even though the Passover would be the next day. And the great Sanhedrin completely ignored their axiom to save, not to destroy life. According to Mark 14:64 they all condemned Jesus as worthy of death. It was unanimous. Their court system was that if the Sanhedrin voted unanimously for a verdict of guilt, the accused would be set free because they demonstrated a lack of mercy. There was no system like this in the world. But they violated all the principles of justice they affirmed and implemented and breached all their standards to condemn the most innocent person who ever lived. In this way, the verdict of the Sanhedrin of the Jews was made.

Now let’s see Jesus’ trial before Pilate. 23:1 says, “Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate.” In the Jewish court, if one was deemed guilty, there had to be a full day before execution took place so that any other evidence might come to light. During that day, the judges could not be occupied with anything but the case, even fasting with no drink to avoid anything that might render their minds less capable of reflection. However, after the verdict of a death sentence on Jesus, the Sanhedrin immediately took him to Pilate. Surprisingly, the whole assembly of the Sanhedrin, the entire body of over seventy men, came to Pilate, which must have never happened during his tenure as a governor from 26 to 36 A.D., a ten-year period.

In verse 2 it says, “And they began to accuse him, saying, ‘We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king.’” The Sanhedrin sentenced Jesus to death with the guilt of blasphemy claiming to be the Son of God. But this indictment would not make any sense to the Roman governor. So they accused Jesus as a revolutionary against Rome. What was Pilate’s response? Verse 3 says, “So Pilate asked Jesus, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’” Pilate probably wanted to make sure whether Jesus was a threat to Roman power. Yet, according to John’s gospel, at this question, Jesus asked, “Is that your own idea or did others talk to you about me?” (Jn 18:34) When we consider this, we see that those who have a personal idea of the king of the Jews are blessed people to be welcomed into his kingdom, obtaining eternal salvation. So we can conjecture that Pilate’s question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” was more than just to know whether Jesus was a rebel against Rome. At this question, Jesus replied, “Yes, it is as you say.” Certainly, Jesus’ reply did not mean that he was a revolutionary standing against Rome. Jesus must have meant what it truly meant. The king of the Jews is the promised Messiah and King, the King of the whole world. He is the object of worship for all people of the world. When Jesus was born, the Magi from the east came to Jerusalem asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him” (Mt 2:2). At this Pilate must have sensed that Jesus had no part with rebellion against Rome, not guilty of any crime. According to Matthew’s gospel, after Jesus replied, “Yes, it is as you say,” he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, and he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?” But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor (Mt 27:12-14). So to the eyes of the Roman governor Jesus was absolutely innocent, not guilty of whatsoever. Luke wrote in verse 4, “Then Pilate announced to the chief priest and the crowd, ‘I find no basis for a charge against this man.’” No threat to Pax Romana. The trial before Pilate seemed to be favurable up to this point.

Then in verse 5, “But they insisted, ‘He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.” Still the Jews were accusing Jesus of inciting a riot by his radical teaching. Yet, Pilate had no interest in their insistence. However, the word “Galilee” caught his attention, and he learned that Jesus was a Galilean under Herod’s jurisdiction. It seemed that he had found a way out of dealing with this heavy case of Jesus, the king of the Jews. So he handed the case to Herod the tetrarch, Herod Antipas, who was also in Jerusalem at that time, in his Jerusalem residence, the Hasmonsean palace. He ruled over Galilean Persia from 4 B.C. to 39 A.D., forty-three years.

Let’s see Jesus’ trial before Herod. Verse 8 says, “When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle.” Until now there were two connections between Jesus and Herod. The first connection written in Luke 9:7-9 is that when Herod the tetrarch heard about Jesus’ disciples field work training, he was perplexed, because some were saying that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead, and he said, “I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?” He was haunted probably by the sight of John’s head rolling around. He was afraid that Jesus might be John the Baptist from the dead. The second connection written in Luke 13:31-33 is that when Jesus heard that Herod wanted to kill him, Jesus said, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.” He was first afraid of Jesus and then he wanted to kill Jesus. Now the third connection is here. This time he could encounter Jesus directly. He was greatly pleased at this encounter but only wanted to see Jesus perform some miracle just to satisfy his curiosity. He plied Jesus with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. He was not worthy of any word from Jesus. In verses 10-11, “The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed him and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, the sent him back to Pilate.” So he joined the scorn of the council, playing a little politics, most likely to gain support from for his ruling. Anyway, Herod also could not find any guilt in Jesus. Luke commented in verse 12, “That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies.” Herod and Pilate became friends in common hatred toward Jesus for each one’s own purpose to keep the people under their control.

Jesus’ trial before Herod is uniquely written in Luke’s gospel. When we think of Herod’s life, what an amazing blessing it is that he could have Jesus the Son of God right before his eyes. But he had no eyes to see Jesus. He could raise any meaningful question to him. He ended up mocking Jesus with his body guards and starting a friendship with Pilate on that day. He could have begun friendship with Jesus, which would be truly wonderful in his life. But he lost such a chance. What a monumental waste! What a tragedy! We also have the tremendous blessing of encountering Jesus in the Spirit through his word. In this blessing, we may build up friendship with Jesus more and more, not with the world. James says in James 4:4 that friendship with the world is hatred toward God and anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”

Jesus was again brought to Pilate. In verses 13-16 it says, “Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, ‘You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis or your charges against him. Neither does Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.” Pilate wanted to declare that Jesus was not guilty. Now two judges, Pilate and Herod, examined Jesus’ innocence.

With one voice they cried out, ‘Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!’ (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.) Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him! And the third time he spoke to them: ‘Why? What crime has this man committed! I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him.” Here “punish” is in NASB “chastise”, different from “flog/scourge.” Pilate attempted to release Jesus three times, for Jesus’ innocence was so certain.

But with loud shorts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. At this Pilate could not go further anymore, because of his past bad record in ruling the Palestinians: Once he and his soldiers paraded around Jerusalem with a bust of Caesar on top of the golden eagle of every army banner. The Jews despised anything that was an idol. All previous Roman governors had removed those things. But Pilate was adamant. Another time, the project of water supply in Jerusalem was accomplished with the temple money. Still another time he put shields up in his palace with the inscription of Tiberius on the shields. All these caused the Jews to riot, and Pilate was unyielding. Finally each of the events was reported to the Roman Emperor and his position became greatly endangered.

So here at their insistent loud shouts, Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they had asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

Pilate was a capable man to rise up to the position of Roman governor. He was a general in the army, he was the administrator of the tax system of the Romans in Israel, and he was the supreme judge on behalf of Rome. He has given the authority to deal with Jesus and judge justly. He could have opportunity to converse with Jesus and come to the knowledge of the truth. However, his life was a life of compromise, and he could not get out of his own track of life, as the Sanhedrin, the track of bigoted religious false security and legalism, and Herod, the track of pleasure-seeking. The way to get out of such a track is repentance. So a constant message of the Bible is “repent and believe.”

In this trial of Jesus, we have some more to think of. The shouts of the chief priests, the rulers and the people and their will prevailed. But in truth, God’s will prevailed, overriding their will. God’s will was to release Barabbas and let Jesus, the one proved to be absolutely innocent, be surrendered to be crucified. The name Barabbas means “the son of abba”, the son of the father, while Jesus is the true Son of the Father. On that day, Barabbas was to be crucified along with his fellow criminals. But he was exactly replaced by Jesus. As for Barabbas, this was an accident, a miraculous accident. He was deserved crucifixion because of his crime of insurrection and murder. He had not done anything worth of his release. But on that day, the day of Passover, he who had been thrown into prison was suddenly released being replaced by Jesus called Christ, the Son of the Father. What a grace! What a providence! The Bible does not tell of his life afterwards. Probably he became a wonderful Christian, devoting his whole life to Christ Jesus. Or he was just physically released and continued his life of sin. There are many people who are blessed in many ways in the name of Jesus, but spiritually deteriorated. Barabas was literally, physically replaced. But what truly matters is spiritual replacement through repentance and faith in Jesus. We were worthy of eternal punishment in the wrath of God because of our sins. But Jesus was tried to be unspeakably punished by crucifixion in our place.

I was a coward who was on the first list among those to be plunged into in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. But one day, I was suddenly invited by my army friend to Bible study and I see that I have been released because of Jesus’ replacement, getting out of my fearful and legalistic life, headed to eternal judgment. What a grace! 10 years ago one man was sitting in Robart library at U of T. He was suddenly invited to Bible study and it turned that he got out of the track of eternal destruction due to his pleasure-seeking life and became a follower of Jesus with many blessings. He struggles to deny himself and take up his cross and follow Jesus to the end of life. What a grace! What a providence. May God help him not to lose the focus on Jesus.

Thank and praise Jesus who became a substitute for us in the will of God. May we all bear the marvelous grace of Jesus by knowing that our life is a trial before him concerning what we speak, what we do, and what we think, and by striving to have a closer friendship with Jesus, instead of with the world.