



The Tale of Two Trials

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 26:57-75

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Beloved, as we get into this text this morning, it is important to note that none of the gospel writers give a full account of every aspect of Christ's trials, both a religious and a civil trial, each of them consisting of three parts. But we shouldn't be surprised at that since none of the gospel writers is writing a complete biography of Jesus. Instead, they are telling a story, making a point, and choosing to include the aspects of Christ's trials that move their story forward and which makes the readers, us, to understand the message they are trying to convey. That is especially true of the text that we are looking at today.

Matthew deliberately ties the story of Christ's trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin to Peter's "trial" before the servants of Caiaphas to show us the vast difference between the Savior and the sinners He came to save, between the Master and His disciples. He does this to show us the contrast between Christ's courage and Peter's cowardice, between Christ's strength and Peter's weakness, between Christ's steadfast and unchanging love and Peter's vacillating affection, and to reveal clearly to us the eternal faithfulness of Christ even in the face of the temporary faithlessness of Peter. This is a story of contrasts so let's look at this text this morning and let's start with the trial of our Lord before Caiaphas.

The Trial of Jesus (v. 57-68) Pick it up in verse 57. Matthew writes: "Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered." (Matthew 26:57, ESV) This isn't the first stop that the arresting officers made on their way from Gethsemane. The first stop was at the house of the ex-high priest and the father-in-law of Caiaphas, Annas. Matthew, however, skips that scene to take us directly to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest, where a quorum of the Sanhedrin just happen to conveniently be assembled in the middle of the night. The message that Matthew is meaning to convey is clear. These men, these men who were entrusted with the responsibility of teaching the Israelites the Word of God, these men who were responsible for leading the nation in the ways of

righteousness were the leading men in the conspiracy to take hold of Christ and to put him to death. They have laid hold of Him and have gathered for one purpose, to find Christ guilty of a crime that is worthy of death.

So, Jesus is taken to Caiaphas and we read: “And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end.” (Matthew 26:58, ESV) Peter is following Christ at a distance, staying in the courtyard outside of Caiaphas’ house while inside Jesus is on trial for His life. Two trials are about to take place with two very different defendants and two very different results. Matthew describes the trial of Jesus first.

He says: “Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward...” (Matthew 26:59–60a, ESV) Now understand this beloved, there are a number of illegalities that make this trial of Jesus unjust and unrighteous and we could list a number of things that would render the ultimate decision of the Sanhedrin illegitimate, but honestly, to focus on that is to miss the forest for the trees. This is no trial at all, this is no search for the truth; this is a pretext for murder. It is a farce, a travesty, and it gives us startling insight into the irrationality of these fallen men.

Vainly trying for some reason to maintain the appearance of proper legal proceedings, wanting to have some air of legitimacy, they seek false testimony, spurious charges that would make it appear that Jesus deserved to die. They need to present some sort of reason for putting him to death. The idea, in fact, is that they actually prepared witnesses and yet despite their efforts and the numbers of false witnesses that came forward, none of them could agree on their stories, a necessity to put someone to death. They were inept. Their testimonies failed to agree with one another.

We have no way of knowing how many false witnesses came forward, but finally, it seems, the Sanhedrin get what they are looking for. Matthew writes, starting in the last half of verse 60: “At last two came forward and said, “This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’” And the high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” But Jesus remained silent.” (Matthew

26:60–63a, ESV) Two men come forward and recount a twisted, inaccurate and deliberately deceiving version of what Jesus said in the book of John after He had cleansed the temple for the first time. John tells us that in John 2:18 after Jesus cleansed the temple: “So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking about the temple of his body.” (John 2:18–21, ESV)

Jesus had never said that he would destroy the temple. That was an outright distortion of His words. He never said He would destroy the temple. He was speaking of what would be done to Him; it was a reference to his death and resurrection. This testimony is clearly false but it was significant. It would have outraged the Jews and it could have been twisted and presented to the Romans as a social or political threat. Despite the words, despite the prodding of the high priest, Jesus remained silent. He said nothing. Why? Why not just clear up the confusion? Why not set the record straight? Why not defend Himself?

Certainly we know that it is in keeping with the prophecies of His passion, right? Isaiah 53:7 says of Christ: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7, ESV) He fulfills the Word of God, the prophecies of Isaiah; we see that. But what stands behind this fulfillment of the Word. Do you know? It’s love. It’s love for you. The reason that He opened not His mouth to defend Himself is because He loves you and is determined to save you. He is willing to suffer injustice to Himself, to be falsely convicted, oppressed and afflicted so that He can satisfy the justice of God’s wrath against you. Jesus chose not to defend Himself because He is determined to die in your place, -- that is the reason for His silence. He loves His people and He is determined to remain silent, not wishing to spare Himself, so that He can lay down His life to save yours. He will not defend Himself against false charges. He silent because He loves His sheep and because He has come to save His people from their sins. He is not here to defend Himself legally any more than He defended Himself physically in Gethsemane. He is there to be condemned to death.

Still concerned that he might not yet have enough to make the death sentence stick, and revealing that he knows exactly the implications of the muddled accusation made in verse 61, (that the promise of raising the temple in three days is a reference by Christ to His divinity), Caiaphas proceeds to put Christ under oath and ask the question and get the answer that he

knows he will get that will allow him to condemn Christ to death. Matthew writes: "And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.'" (Matthew 26:63, ESV) Make the claim. Tell us with your own lips right here, right now. Are you the Christ, the Son of God? By the name of the Living God, answer!

And Jesus does not disappoint. Though He remained silent when He was falsely accused, when placed under oath and commanded to answer directly the question of who He is, Jesus answers, knowing full well that it will cause Him to be condemned. Still, He does not hold back the truth. "Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.'" (Matthew 26:64, ESV) You have said so...it is the exact words that he had spoken to Judas identifying him as His betrayer. In essence, Jesus says: "You know who I Am," Jesus says. You know the answer.

Jesus confesses that He is the Christ, the Son of God, but He does not stop there. He tells them the whole truth, so they have no excuse. He warns them of the truth that is staring them in the face though they refuse to see it. Standing there, seemingly defenseless, soaked with His bloody sweat, surrounded by those who hated Him, abandoned by His friends, meek and lowly, Jesus lets Caiaphas and all who are with him know that appearance is not eternal reality. He says to them: But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven. He combines the words of Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14 and He tells them in no uncertain terms that He is far more than they ever thought that He was claiming to be. He is the ruler of the universe, the one whose enemies will be made His footstool, the One who is seated at the right hand of God Almighty, who will come to judge the world and everyone in it, including them! He was declaring to these guys that in God's will they were his judges at that time. But Jesus was warning these judges that soon their roles will be reversed, and they would see him, the Son of Man, seated, enthroned, exalted, and honored as the King. In other words, Jesus was telling his accusers, "Listen, supreme court, Sanhedrin, Caiaphas, Annas, and every rotten and corrupt judge--our roles will be reversed. I will come again as the Cosmic Ruler and the Righteous Judge of all the earth. Then I will judge you." It is a bold, uncompromising, unashamed declaration of Jesus deity, Lordship and Kingship over all, not just Israel.

His humiliation at their hands, His suffering, His coming death was only by His choice. It did not in the least affect His true glory. This trial did not un-Christ Jesus, did not un-God the Son of

God, or rob Him of His throne. He shall still be called “Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” (Isaiah 9:6–7, ESV) Caiaphas was imagining a vain thing, setting himself against The Lord, against Yahweh, and against His Anointed. He may think He has the upper hand, but “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.” (Psalm 2:4–12, ESV)

What a powerful statement – eternal truth!! And you either treat that truth with contempt to your everlasting ruin or you submit to it for your everlasting joy. Those are the only two possible responses. But Jesus was speaking to men who were willingly blind and deaf. Self-righteousness, pride, and willful unbelief darkened their understanding and stopped their ears. Never was there a greater instance of spiritual darkness and blindness. Caiaphas and those with him understood what Jesus was saying the message but they refused to have ears to hear and chose to respond in contempt. They would not consider the truth. Their minds were made up.

“Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?” They answered, “He deserves death.”” (Matthew 26:65–66, ESV) Ever the showman, Caiaphas tears his robe and levels a charge of blasphemy at the One who is Truth Incarnate. And then, like beasts, these men in their depravity begin to mock and abuse Jesus. “Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, saying, “Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?”” (Matthew 26:67–68, ESV) They unwittingly fulfill the very prophecies that prove who Christ is. As Isaiah had written of Him: “I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.” (Isaiah 50:6, ESV) what scene this is. When we see this taking place, we are seeing the very realization of the promise of Isaiah 53 beginning to be fulfilled: “Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5b, ESV) Again the question – why does

He endure this from the hands of such wicked me? Because He loves us. He endures that humiliation, that degradation that He does not deserve so that we will never have to endure the humiliation, chastisement and degradation that we deserve. Christ remains true to us because He loves us and is willing to suffer for us. This trial ought to make us say, “Hallelujah, what a Savior!” – especially in light of

The Trial of Peter (v. 69-75) The entire time that Christ is being falsely accused, treated with contempt and suffering humiliation, yet remaining faithful to us, Peter is in the midst of a trial himself, though not nearly of the same degree. He is not on trial for his life. He is not facing men who are seeking to kill him, but rather a couple of servant girls and small group of insignificant people. It is a trial that exposes Peter’s and our desperate need for a Savior.

While Jesus is facing his trial inside the palace of Caiaphas we read: “Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.”” (Matthew 26:69–70, ESV) Faced with the question of his relationship to and allegiance to Christ, Peter’s first instinct is to lie. But it doesn’t end there. “And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” And again he denied it with an oath: “I do not know the man.”” (Matthew 26:71–72, ESV) Slinking away from the crowd, yet another servant girl saw him and identified him as one of the disciples. Not content to tell another simple lie, Peter responds with an oath, something along the lines of “I swear by the name of God that I do not know this man!” Placing an oath upon himself, he swears falsely, unwilling to even take the name of Jesus upon his lips. But still, it is not finished.

“After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” (Matthew 26:73–74, ESV) This time, the one who know Jesus Christ more intimately than most and as intimately as anyone ever had responds by calling upon himself the lot of all who do not know Christ. He says something along the lines of this: “May God curse me if I know this man. I do not know him.” It is both chilling and profoundly sad.

How did Peter get to this point, to this point of faithlessly denying that he knew Christ, doing it so intensely that swore an oath and called down a curse on his head? It is not heard to see if you think back to what took place in the Upper Room. He was filled with fleshly self-confidence that he would never fall, would never shrink back from Jesus. He slept in Gethsemane rather than praying. He failed to commune with God in prayer, seeking His strength, seeking His gracious empowerment to walk uprightly and faithfully. And then last, he lost confidence in the Word of God. He manifested unbelief. Christ had said that He had power over death, that He would be betrayed into the hands of His enemies, suffer much, die and be raised from the dead, but those words from Jesus had no power in his self-confident and prayerless heart. He was faithless regarding the clear teaching of Christ. Matthew made that clear when he tells us that "Peter was following him at a distance...to see the end." (Matthew 26:58, ESV) He was not holding fast to faith in Christ's words of the resurrection, instead he was expecting to see the end of Jesus' life and ministry altogether.

I would say to you beloved that these things form the anatomy of any sin by a child of God. Self-confidence and complacency – a trust in your own strength, your own righteousness, your own wisdom; prayerlessness – a failure to abide in Christ, to draw upon His strength, to draw your life from Him, to remain connected to Him in dependence and supplication; and unbelief – unbelief regarding His Word, regarding His promises, regarding His warning and exhortations – those three things – an overinflated sense of self, prayerlessness and unbelief regarding the truth are the root of any sin. It doesn't matter what sin it is – pride, arrogance, stealing, lying, jealousy, gossip, malice, sexual immorality, unrighteous anger, strife, impurity, drunkenness, hatred, lack of self-control --- name it – they all proceed from those three things.

Peter denies Christ, the One who loves Him, the One who came to deliver Him from the curse. He denies Him just as we do when we sin. Make no mistake beloved; sin is a denial of Christ. It is a denial of His Lordship, a denial of His grace, a denial of His love, a denial of His faithfulness, a denial of His worth, a denial of His blessings and His favor. That is what all sin truly is. It is what our sin is. It is a denial of Christ.

Having denied Jesus three times, Matthew tells us: "And immediately the rooster crowed." (Matthew 26:74b, ESV) Luke adds one other detail in his account that is particularly poignant and telling. He says: "And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times."" (Luke 22:61, ESV) Do you see this? As the final denial is rolling off the tongue of

Peter, and as Jesus is being led across the courtyard to the holding cell until His official sentence is pronounced at daybreak, the Savior is looking at Peter. His face beaten, bloodied and bruised, soaked in spittle, Jesus looks at Peter. In pain, but filled with love and pity for His wavering disciple, Jesus looks at Peter. "And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly." (Matthew 26:75, ESV)

Oh how he wept! He mourned. He felt deeply his denial of Jesus, the fracture in their fellowship, the weight of his transgression. He wept bitter, burning painful tears. He wept the tears of the broken and Christ granted him repentance. Yes, Peter failed horribly! But this is why Jesus dies for him and for us! Even in his sin, Peter is not beyond the love of Christ. In fact, He never was. Not before, not during and not after this night. In the dark night of his soul, Peter was not alone, was not unloved.

Before this moment ever came Jesus had told Peter: ""Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."" (Luke 22:31–32, ESV) Jesus told Peter this time would come, but He promised him that His failure would not be final and complete, because Jesus had prayed for him. He had prayed for him because He loved Him and because He had prayed for him, Peter would return and he would strengthen his brothers.

He was not beyond Christ's love that night, for although he had denied Jesus, still Christ's eyes were upon him, seeking to remind him of His words that He had spoken. And Peter was not beyond the love of Christ after this night either. John tells us

The Rest of Peter's Story (John 21:15-19) Look at these words, this account of Christ's pursuit of Peter after the resurrection, His love in seeking him out to restore Him to full fellowship with Him despite His sin. "When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know

everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”” (John 21:15–19, ESV)

The way that our Lord deals with Peter is the process that is repeated each time that the Lord reveals sin in us – conviction, crushing, humility, brokenness leading to repentance and restoration. Such is the pursuing love of Christ, not only that he would save us but that He would have us be free from the dominion and the power of sin in our lives and that we would walk in the liberty of sons and daughters of God.

Understand why it is that Jesus and Peter can deal with his sin like this. It is what we have seen woven through this account over and over. It is because of the overarching love of Christ and Peter needs to know it. And beloved, that is the key to dealing with our own sin. We need to know that Christ loves us and has entirely forgiven us so that we can deal with our sin fully and completely, so that it will not be a barrier to our fellowship with Him nor to our displaying His glory in our lives. The only way that I can bring my sin fully before Jesus and confess it and forsake it by the strength of the Spirit who dwells within me is to be sure that all my sin has been forgiven – past, present, and future – in Christ’s death on the cross.

The gospel frees me to deal with my sin instead of hiding it. Out of deep and gracious and saving love, God has already charged my sin to Christ. Out of deep and gracious and abiding love Christ has died and risen from the dead to pay for my sin. To the extent that I grasp in my soul the truth of God’s forgiveness in Christ, to the extent that I am convinced of the love of God in Christ, I will be able to face and forsake the sin in my life and not be crippled by shame. Christ does not come to Peter and He does not come to us as our judge, but as our Savior and Lord, coming alongside of us, as He did Peter to deal with our sin and put it to death. You see Peter would know by experience the bitterness of sin and failure but also the great joy and deep peace of holding fast to and living for and loving Christ.

Peter was freely forgiven by Jesus, not only was he fully restored to his place of apostleship, but Jesus entrusts to him that which is dearest to Christ on the earth – His sheep. He calls Peter to

feed them, to teach them the Word of God, to encourage them in the gospel, to fulfill his ministry faithfully, to fulfill the purpose that Christ has for him of shepherding, strengthening and nourishing the flock of Christ with God's Word. And in case that Peter is fearful of a future, crippling failure, Jesus tells him: Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) These words from Jesus were words of great grace to Peter. Don't you know that in his heart, Peter was longing to prove his love for Jesus to be true? Don't you know that Peter was fearful that he might horribly fail His Savior again? These words were steel to Peter's soul. "When it comes down to it Peter, you will be faithful. You will give up your life for my sake and I will carry you through. By my grace, you will be faithful and when you stumble my grace will be greater than your sin."

There is indeed much that we can hold fast to as an anchor for our souls from this text – the surpassing love and faithfulness of Christ to His people, to you and to me despite our sin and our faithlessness – the weakness that we all have in ourselves, that apart from the grace of God and humble dependence upon Christ, abiding in Him and seeking Him in prayer, exercising our hearts to trust His Word, sin will entangle us all – the faithful pursuing love of Christ to rescue and restore us to repentance and faithfulness – our duty to express gracious and forbearing love toward erring saints – and the truth that Jesus died for our every sin, even the sin of Peter, and every sin by which we deny Him. Oh how we need Him and oh how He is forever there for us! Again I say to you as I did last week: "Behold your God! Behold your Faithful King! Wonder at the wondrous One who loved you, even you, unto death!"

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