

Matthew 26:59-68
Christ under Oath
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Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was a man with a purpose. He came into this world to save sinners, to seek and to save that which was lost. He came to give His life a ransom for many. He came in due time to die for the ungodly. He was not a victim of circumstances. He was a man with a mission who remained in control of the events of His life. He said in John 10:18:

18 “No one takes [My life] from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. ...”

Jesus came to lay down His life as a sacrifice for sin, and Jesus also came to lay down the foundation for the New Testament church. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said,

18 “... on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

Jesus had this double purpose for His time upon this earth, both to build a church and to be a sacrifice. To fulfill both purposes, Jesus had to proclaim His message without prematurely provoking His enemies. He had to combine revelation with restraint. He revealed the mystery of His kingdom to His followers, but to those who were outside, His teachings remained the riddle of unexplained parables. Jesus prayed,

Matthew 11:25-27

- 25 ... “I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes.
- 26 “Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight.
- 27 “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.”

Now Jesus began His three and one half years of public ministry with a significant but limited public revelation of His identity. He came to be baptized by John the Baptist. At His baptism, a dove descended upon Him representing the Holy Spirit’s coming upon Him without measure, and a voice proclaimed from heaven, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” This certainly pointed to His being the Messiah, the Anointed One, and to His being the Son of the living God.

On the first Passover after His baptism, Jesus went to Jerusalem and performed many miracles. He then cleansed the temple, driving out those who had turned God’s house of prayer into a house of merchandise. This bold act was an open exercise of Messianic authority, an open identification with the prophesied Messianic Messenger of the covenant who would come to the temple to purify the sons of Levi.

Yet after this and after the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus left Judea and Jerusalem and concentrated His ministry in the

remote regions of Galilee and even beyond. He would heal people and exhort them not to tell others. He taught in parables and explained these only to His followers. He progressively revealed Himself to His disciples, and He clearly identified Himself to them at Caesarea Philippi. This is when Jesus asked His disciples who they said that he was. Peter answered with his crucial confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus confirmed this confession, calling it a revelation from heaven. Then Jesus commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.

Then there came a point in time when Jesus sensed that His hour of sacrifice was at hand. At that point, Jesus changed His strategy and began revealing Himself more openly to His enemies. He set His face toward Jerusalem and began a second period of ministry there. At Jerusalem, He openly healed a man born blind, which was an unprecedented miracle. Then a few months after that, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead after Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Jesus performed this even more astonishing miracle before a crowd in Bethany, just a few miles from Jerusalem. In response to this miracle, the high priest Caiaphas together with other religious leaders in Jerusalem began plotting Jesus’ death.

Soon after this, on the Sunday of Passover week, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey accompanied by a multitude crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” This was a public act laden with Messianic symbolism. Jesus entered Jerusalem in the same manner as Solomon, the son of David and prince of peace, had entered Jerusalem at the time of his anointing as king. Also

Jesus entered Jerusalem in a manner which fulfilled a Messianic prophecy found in the book of Zechariah:

Zechariah 9:9

9 "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; he is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Then on the next day, Monday of Passover week, Jesus again cleansed the temple, publicly exercising His Messianic authority. The religious authorities responded to this second cleansing of the temple:

Mark 11:18

18 And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching.

On Thursday night of this same week, after Jesus had eaten the Passover with His disciples, the authorities arrested Jesus under the cover of darkness and with the help of Judas Ischariot. In our passage for today, Jesus is being tried before the high priest Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. This is the evening before Jesus' crucifixion on Friday. Here at this trial, we find the climax of Jesus' revelation of Himself to His enemies. Let me repeat that. This is the climax of Jesus' revelation of Himself to His enemies. He acknowledged under oath in the presence of the hostile religious authorities that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God.

We will today look at Christ's oath before the Sanhedrin under three headings: the options, the oath, and the outcome.

First, we will look at Christ's options. As Christ stood before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, He had two options: to be silent or to be vocal, to say nothing or to speak up. Jesus had been silent, and then suddenly He spoke up. There really is a consistency to this. What is common in both Jesus' being silent and Jesus' breaking His silence is a resignation to doing the will of His Father, which was for Him to die as a sacrifice for sin. Jesus had settled this at Gethsemane when He had prayed, "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." We read in the book of Hebrews that "for the joy that was set before Him [Jesus] endured the cross, despising the shame." The joy that was set before Jesus was submitting to the will of His Father and dying a sacrificial death in order to redeem God's elect. As Paul says in Philippians, Jesus "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

Jesus was resigned to doing the will of His Father. This is why Jesus was at times silent in His trials before Caiaphas and Pilate, and this is why Jesus at times spoke up. When falsely accused, Jesus kept His peace and was silent. Caiaphas brought in a multitude of false witnesses. Jesus was silent as the false witnesses refuted their own testimonies through obvious contradictions. Then two witnesses, probably members of the Sanhedrin, accused Jesus based on a statement Jesus had made three years earlier at His first cleansing of the temple. At that time, Jesus had said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I

will raise it up.” Jesus was referring to the temple of His body, referring to His own death and resurrection. These two witnesses misquoted and misinterpreted Jesus’ words as a threat to destroy Herod’s temple in Jerusalem. We read in Mark’s Gospel that these two witnesses, even when bearing witness to the same statement of Jesus, could not consistently agree in their allegations. Lying with consistency, when unable to use the truth as a touchstone, is a great challenge. During this time of false accusations, Jesus said nothing to challenge the lies or to defend Himself.

Then Caiaphas the high priest tried something entirely different. Instead of bringing accusations, he challenged Jesus to tell him under oath if Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus broke His silence and said yes. When challenged to witness the good confession and to identify Himself as the Messiah and the Son of God, Jesus spoke up.

Both in speaking and in silence, Jesus was being “obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” By speaking up and openly acknowledging His Messiahship, Jesus was cooperating with these efforts to put Him to death. By keeping silent when His accusers misrepresented His Messiahship and distorted His words, He was refusing to do anything which might hinder or postpone His death.

Let me make one last point on Jesus’ options at this point. The high priest Caiaphas exercised the authority of his position and commanded Jesus to respond under oath as to whether Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus could have remained silent or Jesus could

have spoken up, and Jesus spoke up. When Jesus spoke up, He could have said yes or He could have said no. I would argue that Jesus could have said no and still responded truthfully. Jesus could have said no and meant that He was not the Messiah as Caiaphas defined the Messiah. Jesus was not the political military Messiah which the Jews were wrongly expecting.

You might remember that in John chapter one, a delegation from the Pharisees visited John the Baptist and asked him, “Are you Elijah?” John the Baptist answered, “I am not.” The prophet Malachi had prophesied that God would send Elijah to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus would later say that John the Baptist, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah, was indeed the fulfillment of that Elijah prophecy. But when this delegation of the Pharisees asked John the Baptist the question, “Are you Elijah?” John the Baptist replied, “I am not.” What John the Baptist meant was that he was not the Elijah whom the Jews were expecting. They were mistakenly looking for the literal resurrected Elijah and not another prophet who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. So the denial of John the Baptist was a true statement even though he was the true fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy.

Jesus could have similarly said no to Caiaphas, meaning that He was not the Messiah as Caiaphas defined that term. But Jesus did not take such linguistic considerations into account. Jesus took the opportunity to affirm that He was the Messiah as rightfully understood. He did so because the time had come for Him to reveal Himself openly to His enemies. The time had come for His sacrificial death. For that reason, He now revealed

His Messianic identity to His enemies with that same openness with which He had previously revealed His Messianic identity to His disciples.

We have looked at the options. Our second point is the oath. Caiaphas challenged Jesus to answer his question under oath. This was both an insult and an opportunity.

Caiaphas' challenge for Jesus to answer his question under oath was an insult to Jesus. Jesus had taught that swearing is, in most circumstances, sinful.

Matthew 5:33-37

- 33 "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.'
- 34 "But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne;
- 35 "nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.
- 36 "Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.
- 37 "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

Jesus is here teaching that in most circumstances, as a general rule, a simple yes or no is sufficient. Swearing is calling God as a witness that what we are saying is true. Swearing is making a statement openly in the presence of God, the One who knows with infallible certainty whether what we are saying is true or

false. Swearing is wrong when the implication is that we don't normally live "coram Deo," which is Latin for "before the face of God." Living "coram Deo," living before the face of God means living conscious of the fact that our every word, our every thought, our every deed is open to the all seeing eye of God, who is both omnipresent and omniscient. We don't need to call God as a witness to some of our statements when we make every statement conscious that God is a witness to everything we say. Jesus, the Messiah and the Son of God, was living constantly and consistently before the face of God. Jesus spoke every word with God as His witness to that word as a true word.

If you think about it, when Caiaphas challenged Jesus to testify under oath that Jesus was the Messiah, Caiaphas was thereby assuming that Jesus was not the Messiah. The true Messiah would be living before the face of God and would always be speaking the truth and would not need to back up His word with an oath. In this sense, Caiaphas' calling Jesus to speak under oath was an insult. Jesus bore that insult as a part of the suffering He had to bear, as a part of His humiliation.

Yet there is another sense in which this call to testify under oath was an opportunity. There is a place for swearing, for calling God as one's witness. Swearing an oath can be proper when the implication is not that we do not always speak with God as our witness, when the implication is not that we speak with God as our witness only on selected occasions. Swearing an oath can be proper when our purpose is to assure others that we are speaking the truth on some solemn and significant occasion. In that sense, God himself has sworn an oath.

Psalm 110:4

- 4 The LORD has sworn and will not relent, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

Hebrews 6:13-14

- 13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself,
14 saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you."

With this proper use of the oath, Jesus took advantage of the opportunity to bring the Sanhedrin with Him on this solemn occasion into the very presence of God. Jesus confessed the good confession before them and before God as His witness.

When Jesus swore that oath, He was in a sense swearing by Himself. Swearing is calling someone higher as a witness, and, as I have already said, God can call no one higher than Himself. For that reason, God swears by Himself. God promises, and then God calls Himself as witness that His promise is true. God does this as a guarantee to strengthen our weak faith. As Jesus in His humanity voiced this oath before Caiaphas, He was calling Himself in His divinity as witness that what He said was indeed true.

We have looked at the options and the oath. Our last point is the outcome. On the part of Caiaphas, we see an outward expression of outrage and righteous indignation. He cried out "blasphemy" and tore His clothes in symbolic anguish. Yet inwardly, Caiaphas was rejoicing. Inwardly, he was leaping for joy. He at

long last had his long sought after quest. He at long last had his excuse for asking Pilate to execute Jesus. Jesus had confessed that He was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. Caiaphas knew that he could take this confession to Pilate and interpret it in terms of the common Jewish understanding of the Messiah as a military ruler. Caiaphas knew that he could use this before Pilate as evidence of treason and sedition. Caiaphas knew that he could also take this same confession to the Jews and interpret it in terms of Jesus' teaching. Jesus had made claims which interpreted Messianic Sonship as Divine Sonship. Caiaphas knew he could use this with the Jews as evidence of blasphemy.

Jesus, however, warned that there would be yet another witness that what Jesus had said about Himself was indeed true. Jesus had stated that He was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus had called God as His witness that this was true. The third witness would be the coming witness of history.

Matthew 26:64

64 Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

History was going to confirm that Jesus was who He said He was. Jesus was going to be resurrected from the dead in a glorious resurrection body. Jesus was going to ascend up to the right hand of God, to the place of all authority. Jesus was going to fulfill the Son of Man vision of Daniel chapter 7:

Daniel 7:13-14

- 13 I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him.
- 14 Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.

Jesus as the reigning Lord of history came in judgment against Jerusalem when the Roman armies destroyed the city and the temple in 70 A.D. That was a preliminary fulfillment of His statement which occurred before that spiritually adulterous generation which rejected Him passed away. And, of course, Jesus will come in a more literal sense at the Second Coming when Jesus will return to earth in His glorified physical body. On that day, all will be called before His judgment seat. History has confirmed and is going to confirm that what Jesus said under oath was true.

We too will be among those who will stand before Jesus on that day. But Jesus will be there as our Advocate. Because we have confessed Him before men, He will confess us before His Father. We will be acknowledged and acquitted on that fateful day because we have accepted Jesus' confession that He is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God, and we have trusted Him alone for salvation.

Jesus has revealed Himself openly today to you. He says to you today under oath in the pages of Scripture, “I am the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And now you must respond. You have no choice. Whatever you do will be a response. I plead with you to respond with your own confession of faith. For if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.