

Matthew 26:57-68
The Sanhedrin Judges Jesus
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We have gathered here this Lord's Day for a double purpose. We have gathered here to hear Christ proclaimed and to see Christ portrayed. This is truly a dynamic combination when done in spirit and in truth, when done in sincerity and in integrity, when done true from the heart and true to the Bible. Word and sacrament is a powerful combination when the Holy Spirit is present to open our ears to hear and to open our eyes to see.

The message of Jesus is proclaimed verbally, and we cry out, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." The message of Jesus is portrayed visually, and we cry out, "Sir, we would see Jesus! For everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him has everlasting life, and Jesus will raise him up at the last day."

We see the bread and the wine, and we are reminded that Jesus is our spiritual food and drink. He spiritually nourishes us and makes our heart glad. He sustains our spiritual life, and enables us to grow spiritually.

The verbal word is proclaimed to all, but the visual word, the sacrament, is administered only to some. It is administered only to those who have identified with Christ through baptism, only

to those who possess the years and ability to partake meaningfully and responsibly, only to those who profess faith in Christ, only to those who live lives credibly consistent with that profession.

There is a message for those who do not now partake. The message is a challenge to pray for the gifts of faith and a credible profession and the spiritual maturity to partake of this blessed meal meaningfully and responsibly. Those who do not partake should want to, and should seek that privilege.

There is also a message for those who do partake. The message is a challenge to act out one's faith, to acknowledge symbolically one's dependence upon Jesus for spiritual nourishment and growth. The message is a challenge to identify publicly with Jesus and to renew one's covenant commitment to Jesus.

The sacrament of baptism is like the marriage ceremony. It is that initial act of commitment which is done only once and done once for all. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is like the daily kiss, the daily reaffirmation of one's commitment, the frequent and regular restatement of one's love and devotion.

In preparation for the Lord's Supper, let's now consider our text and see what we can learn about the saving work of our Lord on our behalf.

On the way to the cross, Jesus endured a number of judicial trials before corrupt individuals. Jesus was willing to submit to

these judicial travesties so He could be our Advocate when we stand in the dock before Holy God. This is a part of the price Jesus had to pay to redeem us. This is a part of the cost Jesus had to bear in order to offer us the unsearchable riches of His grace.

We are today looking at the second of these trials. The first was Jesus' trial before Annas, and the second was Jesus' trial before Caiaphas, the high priest and head of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Our focus today will be on Caiaphas' rending his garments and charging Jesus with blasphemy. We will look at Caiaphas' symbolic action and his accusing statement. We have already in previous sermons examined the events leading up to this, but we will quickly review these before proceeding on.

Caiaphas had been plotting the death of Jesus for a period of time. Some weeks before this fateful Passover week, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. When news of this miracle reached Jerusalem, the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin to discuss this development. They were alarmed at the new credibility which this astonishing miracle gave to Jesus. They were alarmed at the rising popularity of Jesus in the wake of this supernatural wonder. They were fearful that if Jesus' following continued to gain momentum, then the Romans would become alarmed and would intervene and would even replace them as the Jewish leaders of the nation. Caiaphas openly stated before the Sanhedrin that in order to prevent this from happening, Jesus would have to die. From that day forward, the religious leaders began plotting the death of Jesus. Caiaphas was not interested in whether Jesus was

innocent or guilty of any crime. He simply wanted Jesus dead. He simply wanted to find a basis for having Jesus executed. He needed an excuse to justify Jesus' death before the Jewish people and an excuse to use in pressuring Pilate to use his power of capital punishment against Jesus.

At the trial we read about in our text, Caiaphas was looking for these excuses. He brought in a multitude of false witnesses to bring accusations against Jesus. 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 which 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 combined with a boast that He could rebuild it miraculously in three days. 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.

These false witnesses had not accomplished anything, so Caiaphas the high priest then 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. There does appear to be a logical train of thought here. There were prophecies which connected the Messiah with the temple at Jerusalem. There was, of course, the

familiar prophecy about the Messiah's coming to the temple and cleansing it:

Malachi 3:1b-3

- 1 "... And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts.
- 2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like launderer's soap.
- 3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; he will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness.

Jesus fulfilled this prophecy when He came to the temple and cleansed it by driving out the merchants and money changers. Jesus had done this twice, once near the beginning of His public ministry, and once again during his passion week at the end of His public ministry.

Yet there were other prophecies which indicated that the Messiah would also in some sense build the temple. One of these prophecies, the foundational one, is typological. Through Nathan the prophet, God gave some promises to King David which related first to David's son Solomon and then in a typological sense to David's greater Son, the Messiah:

2 Samuel 7:13-14a

- 13 He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.
- 14 I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. ...

Solomon was the biological son of David who ruled upon David's throne after David died. The name Solomon is related to the Hebrew word for peace, which is shalom. Solomon, the prince of peace, ruled in the time of peace which followed the many years of war during the reign of King David, the warrior king. During this time of peace, God used Solomon to build God's temple in Jerusalem.

Then later the prophet Zechariah revealed that the Messiah, the antitypical Son of David, the antitypical Prince of Peace, would also build God's temple.

Zechariah 6:12b-13

- 12 ... Thus says the LORD of hosts, saying: "Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From His place He shall branch out, and He shall build the temple of the LORD;
- 13 Yes, He shall build the temple of the LORD. He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule on His throne; so He shall be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both."

The New Testament tells us that Jesus fulfills this prophecy not by building a literal temple out of cold stone but by building the new covenant church, which is the antitypical temple, a temple made out of the living stones of new covenant saints:

Ephesians 2:19-22

- 19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners,
but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the
household of God,
20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and
prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone,
21 in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows
into a holy temple in the Lord,
22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling
place of God in the Spirit.

That is how Jesus fulfills the prophecy that the Messiah would build the temple of God.

Yet Caiaphas no doubt was thinking in terms of the Messiah's building a literal temple out of literal stones. So when Jesus remained silent when some accused Him of saying that He would destroy the temple and then rebuild it in three days, Caiaphas asked Jesus if Jesus did indeed claim to be the Messiah. After all, the Messiah is supposed to build the temple in Jerusalem. So why won't Jesus respond to the accusation that He at one time stated that this is what He was planning on doing?

Jesus responded to Caiaphas with the words, "It is as you said." This was a positive but measured response to Caiaphas' question. Jesus was not the political messiah whom Caiaphas and other Jews were then expecting. Jesus was not the expected military messiah who would lead earthly armies in battles against the pagan Roman legions. Jesus was not a messiah who would build a new temple out of blocks of stone. These were all

distortions and misunderstandings of the Biblical teachings on the Messiah, and Jesus did not want to identify with these. Without intending to endorse these misconceptions of the Messiah, Jesus acknowledged that Caiaphas was correct in his statement that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

Jesus then made His climatic statement about His Messiahship, a statement which indicated that His time of humiliation would soon be over, that His time of exaltation would soon commence, and that His Messiahship was far above anything that Caiaphas had ever imagined. Jesus 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.”

Jesus was here stating that He would soon possess heavenly, even divine authority, that He would be seated at the place of highest privilege relative to the very throne of God. Jesus was here stating that He was about to fulfill the Son of Man prophecy found in Daniel chapter seven.

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 was here claiming that He would receive heavenly authority, that He would exercise this authority throughout history and that Caiaphas himself would see manifestations of Jesus' rule. And, of course, Jesus will exercise this rule in complete fullness and perfection when He returns to this earth in His glorified body, when He raises the dead and when He assembles them before His great white throne for judgment.

In response to this climatic statement of Jesus, Caiaphas performed his symbolic act and made his accusing statement. Caiaphas rent his garment, tore the clothes he was wearing. Rending one's clothes this way was in Biblical times a symbol of intense inner sorrow, a symbol of great inner agony.

You know, this action could have been appropriate and good. It could have been appropriate if only it had symbolized the appropriate inner agony. The king of Ninevah had done something similar when he heard the preaching of Jonah. He had taken off his royal robe, covered himself with sack cloth and sat in ashes. He had done this as a sign of his sorrow over his sins, as a sign of his repentance. And the one standing before Caiaphas was one greater than Jonah.

We can see what rending one's clothes can symbolize in the statement found in Joel 2:12-13:

- 12 “Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”
- 13 So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm.

If Caiaphas’ rending his garment had been symbolic of the sorrow of repentance in response to Jesus’ climatic claim of Messianic authority, that would have been appropriate. But that was not what Caiaphas meant by this symbolic action.

There is another reason for rending one’s garments. King Hezekiah had once rent his garments. He had done so when the King of Assyria had invaded Judah and had sent his envoy, the Rabshakeh, to deliver a message to Jerusalem. The Rabshakeh stated publicly at Jerusalem for all the people to hear that the God of Israel was just another idol, just another limited tribal deity like the gods of the nations which the king of Assyria had already conquered. The Rabshakeh said that it was futile for Judah to trust Jehovah God to deliver them from the king of Assyria. Such a statement was a blasphemous insult to God. Hezekiah tore his clothes, and that was an appropriate response to such blasphemy.

Caiaphas claimed to be following the example set by good King Hezekiah. He was claiming that Jesus had made a blasphemous statement, even as had the Rabshakeh in Hezekiah’s day.

Now in what sense was Caiaphas saying that Jesus had said something blasphemous? Blasphemy in the narrow sense refers to a serious misuse of the holy name of God. Jesus had been careful not to give Caiaphas any excuse for claiming that Jesus had done this. In His statement, Jesus had carefully avoided any direct use of the name of God. Jesus had carefully said that Caiaphas and the other religious authorities who were with him would see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power. Jesus took care to avoid the direct use of God's holy name in His statement and thus had given Caiaphas no excuse for saying that Jesus had misused God's name in any way. So Jesus hadn't committed blasphemy in the narrow sense of the word.

There is, however, a broader, more common meaning for blasphemy. This broader meaning refers to any insult to God. This is what Caiaphas meant when he claimed that Jesus had committed blasphemy. Caiaphas was reacting not to Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. He was reacting to Jesus' definition of His Messiahship. Jesus defined a Messiahship with heavenly authority in a heavenly location, a Messiahship in close association with God. Jesus was associating Himself with divine majesty and ranking Himself with God in a very unique way.

I am reminded of those often quoted words of C.S. Lewis:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He'd be either a lunatic - on a level with a man who says he's a poached egg - or else he'd be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.

If what Jesus said about Himself was false, then His saying it was indeed an insult to the living and true God. And this is what Caiaphas was claiming. There were only two legitimate responses to Jesus' statement. If what Jesus claimed was true, then the appropriate response was to fall down before Jesus in worship. If what Jesus said was false, then the appropriate response was to denounce Him. Caiaphas rejected Jesus' claim as a false claim and denounced Him.

Yet Caiaphas, as he denounced Jesus, was being hypocritical. He rent his clothes as a symbol of inward pain and agony. 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. Caiaphas knew that he could take Jesus' 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 also knew that he could also take this same confession to the Jews and use Jesus' literal words as evidence of blasphemy in the sense of insulting God.

I have one more comment on Caiaphas' tearing his garment. This action is similar to something else which would soon happen in conjunction with the death of Jesus. Another piece of cloth associated with the priesthood would soon be torn.

Matthew 27:50-51

50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.

51 Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom...

Caiaphas the high priest rent his garment to symbolize his inner agony over the claims of Jesus. God rent the temple veil from top to bottom to symbolize, in contrast, His approval of the atoning work of Jesus. Jesus paid for the sins of God's people, the sins which had separated them from fellowship with God. God rent the veil which symbolized that separation.

Caiaphas claimed to be sorrowfully mourning because of the offense he took at the words of Jesus, which he regarded as false. Caiaphas will be mourning more intensely as the words of Jesus prove to be true and are fulfilled. Caiaphas will mourn when he hears about the empty tomb and about the appearances of the resurrected Jesus. Caiaphas will mourn when he hears about the conversion of 3000 Jews on the day of Pentecost. Caiaphas will mourn when he hears about the apostolic miracles in the name of Jesus. Caiaphas will mourn when he hears about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Caiaphas will mourn when he hears about the growing church in Israel and its spreading to the nations of the world. Caiaphas will mourn when the Romans come and destroy Jerusalem in fulfillment of a prophecy made by Jesus. And finally, Caiaphas will mourn when Jesus raises his dead body from the grave and calls him before His judgment throne to give account.

There is another way to mourn about Jesus. Everyone will mourn about Jesus in one of these two ways. The other way is the mourning of repentance as the immediate fruit of saving faith in Jesus. Zechariah had prophesied this mourning:

Zechariah 12:10

- 10 And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they have pierced; they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.

Jesus poured out His Holy Spirit in new covenant fullness on the Day of Pentecost some fifty days after His crucifixion on the Passover. On the Day of Pentecost, three thousand Jews mourned in this good way as a fruit of their faith in Jesus.

I challenge you today to look upon Jesus, the One who was pierced. I challenge you to look upon Jesus with the eyes of faith. I challenge you to mourn with the sorrow of repentance over the sins which sent Jesus to the cross. Do this, and God will turn your sorrow into joy. For your sins will be forgiven, and you will be reconciled forever with the Lord God your Maker.