

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we praise and thank You for all the love, goodness and faithfulness we have received from You. You have granted us many wonderful blessings; help us therefore to accept difficulties and trouble, and bear them in the knowledge that You are in control of all things and always leading us towards our eternal salvation. Thank You heavenly Father; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Find a Psalm with which you are familiar (Psalm 23, 51, or 100 for example), and read it several times. Let the Holy Spirit use it to inspire your prayer

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the witness of the church** *Pray about the witness of your local church in its own locality; pray against any opposition it receives.*
- *Pray for peace in Israel at a critical time in talks with the US*
- *Give thanks for the joy of love and of being with those you love*

Meditation

Inspire us, Lord God, in the paths we take;
May we be wise in all our decisions.

Guide us, Lord God, in the company we keep;
May we be careful to keep close to You.

Direct us, Lord God, in all our conversations;
May we be wise in the things we say.

Protect us, Lord God, in the work we pursue;
May we build Your glorious Kingdom.

Guard us, Lord God, in our passions and feelings;
May we be committed, yet always faithful.

Enthuse us, Lord God, in our hopes and dreams;
May we accept Your plans for our future.

Bible passage – Matthew 26:57-68

⁵⁷ Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. ⁵⁸ Peter followed him at a distance, up to the courtyard of the high priest. He went in and sat with the guards to see how things would turn out.

⁵⁹ The chief priests and the Sanhedrin were looking for false testimony against Jesus in order to have him put to death, ⁶⁰ but they found no-one, though many false witnesses came forward. Eventually two came forward ⁶¹ and said, 'This man said, "I can destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days."' ⁶² The high priest stood up and said, 'Will you not answer? What is it that they testify against you?' ⁶³ But Jesus kept silent. Then the high priest said to him, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' ⁶⁴ 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.'

⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'Blasphemy! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy! ⁶⁶ What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves to die.' ⁶⁷ Then they spat in his face and hit him; and some slapped him, ⁶⁸ saying, 'Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who hit you?'

Bible Study

Review

The story of Jesus' capture and trial is upsetting and painful. By any measure, the standards of justice applied to Jesus were shameful, and they expose the duplicity and deceit of those who wanted to get rid of Him. We are right to feel upset by what we read, but we should never allow this to spill over into anger at those involved, the leaders of the Jews or the individuals who made accusation against Him, for example. All Jesus' disciples are called to stand with Him even in this moment of His life; he was resistant to all the evils thrown at him, just in reply to all and honest in word and deed. Our role is not to point the finger of blame at those who eventually slaughtered Jesus; it is to bear witness to the fact that Almighty God used this awful event to do His ultimate will.

From the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed (26:36-46) and was then betrayed (26:47-56), Jesus was taken to the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest, where the first part of his trial was held. The story of what happened late that night is very strange, and full of unexplained peculiarities. The overall result of what happened was clear, however. Caiaphas charged Jesus with 'blasphemy' despite the lack of judicial process and the hopeless inadequacy of the witnesses brought against Him.

The first peculiarity of the story is found in the first verse, where it says that '*the scribes and the elders had gathered*' (26:57). Matthew was referring to the group of people commonly called the ruling 'Sanhedrin', a body of people charged with maintaining the integrity of Jewish identity and religious practice during the time of Roman rule. It had a membership of 71 religious leaders, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees (called 'elders'), and it had to meet with a quorum of two thirds in order to do official business. The fact that this number had been gathered at this strange evening hour gives us the feeling that Jesus' arrest and capture was indeed an organised plot against Jesus.

There is some difference between the Gospel writers about what happened and when (see Luke 22:66; John 18:12ff), so it is difficult to know exactly what was going on. These proceedings seem to have taken place at night, but legal guidelines from a second century Mishnah say that no trial should take place at night, but this is not certain. We are entitled to ask, therefore, whether the trial was legal or not.

As we read it, the first part of Jesus' trial certainly sounds like a kangaroo court rather than a proper legal process; but it may not have been intended as a formal 'trial' as such at all. It may have been planned as preliminary legal proceedings to try and pin down a charge and find witnesses so that the matter could be decided upon and taken to the governor (27:1,2). The Jews wanted Jesus killed but had to get the Roman authorities to do this for them. In the circumstances, the witnesses were incompetent and Jesus' initial silence made things difficult. When Jesus finally answered Caiaphas, He spoke so well and so strongly (26:64), that Caiaphas was unable to say more. Caiaphas then took the only course open to him; he decided for himself that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy, and invited the Sanhedrin to inflict on Jesus the insult of abuse (26:66,67).

Meanwhile, Peter was standing outside Caiaphas' house doing his best to follow proceedings by overhearing the gossip of the military personnel surrounding the house. He wanted to prove Jesus wrong by staying with Him 'all the way', and he gained entry to the servants' and guards' quarters (26:58). Matthew's mention of him is brief, but it enables us to keep him in mind, for after the 'trial' at Caiaphas' house, Peter becomes the focus of the story again (26:69-75). Remember, this whole passage hinges on whether Jesus is the Messiah or not and Caiaphas' response to this claim; ironically, Peter was the only person at that time to have openly declared that Jesus was indeed the Messiah (16:16).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The search for false testimony against Jesus
- The coming of the Messiah and the destruction of the Temple
- Jesus answers the charges set against Him
- The verdict

Going Deeper

The search for false testimony against Jesus

The Sanhedrin knew what they wanted before proceedings began (26:59). They wanted any trumped up false charge they could lay their hands on which would warrant the death penalty. Remember, the Roman

authorities were happy for the Israelites to practice their religion provided peace was sustained, and any threat to the security of the religious system such as speaking against the Temple could be presented by the Sanhedrin to the Roman governor as rebellion against the authority of Rome.

It is comical that they could not find the false witnesses they wanted (26:60). It was a basic legal requirement that they obtain two witnesses who agreed their accusation (Num 35:30; Duet. 17:6; 19:15), before a sentence of death could be passed. Eventually two people came forward not with false witness, but with what was probably quite correct testimony, concerning a version of what Jesus had said about the Temple.

No Gospel writer reports Jesus as saying these words exactly, 'I can destroy the Temple of God and rebuild it in three days' (26:61), but it is no wonder that some people saw this in His words and deeds. Matthew reported Jesus as prophesying the destruction of the Temple several times (12:6; 21:12-13; 23:38; 24:2) and had Himself desecrated the Temple (Matt 21:12f.). The nearest direct connection we have to the accusation before Caiaphas is in John 2, where, after Jesus had cleared the Temple, John reported that Jesus had an argument with the authorities about '*destroying the Temple and building it up in three days*' (2:19,21). The accusation about destroying the Temple had a strange ring of both truth about it, and yet it was probably trumped up, using words of Jesus in a convenient way to make an accusation. Even so, the threat of destroying the Temple was far from what the authorities wanted. Jesus was reported as saying only that he was able to destroy the Temple, not that He would; '*I can destroy the Temple ...*'; not '*I will destroy the Temple ...*', even so, it was enough for Caiaphas.

The coming of the Messiah and the destruction of the Temple

There is one other implication of these words that it would be easy to forget. In John's Gospel (see ref. above) the destruction of the Temple was likened to Jesus laying down His own life, and the rebuilding in three days was likened to His resurrection and establishment of the church (also implied in Matt 24:1,2). This may not have been what the Sanhedrin heard from these words, but we who read them later make the connection, and can see in this accusation a prophecy that would be fulfilled in the next few days.

It is possible, however, that the authorities did understand a connection between the coming Messiah and the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple. There was much speculation about this, because Zechariah 6:12 and Ezekiel 40ff both talked of the building of a new Temple when the Messiah came, and the magnificent, recently built Temple of Herod was not regarded as the work of the Messiah! This is possibly why Caiaphas challenged Jesus directly, and cut through the debate with a direct question 'what is it that they testify against you' (26:62). In other words, was this statement about destroying the Temple and building another one tantamount to a claim to be the Messiah? He now put this directly to Jesus.

Jesus answers the charges set against Him

Jesus remained silent for a time, fulfilling Isaiah 53:7 'yet He did not open his mouth'. However, it was only a temporary silence. Caiaphas rounded on Jesus with the aggressive demand that He speak, placing Him under oath '*before the Living God*' (26:63). He demanded '*tell us if you are the 'Messiah, the Son of God*' (26:63). We, who have read this story know that Peter, currently outside with the guards had affirmed Jesus as the '*Messiah, the Son of the Living God*' (16:16), and know that this great statement of faith has now been twisted by Caiaphas into an accusation which demanded the death penalty. It is the work of evil to twist truth into lies, and this is one of the clearest examples of this to be found in scripture.

Jesus' reply was the same that he gave Judas at the last supper; '*you have said so*' (26:64 see also 26:25), which was a way of telling His accuser on each occasion to look at the meaning of what he had just said. However, Jesus then spoke out with astonishing clarity, His statement being probably the most powerful of His ministry as recorded by Matthew; '*From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.*' (26:64)

In this remarkable phrase, Jesus lifted the whole idea of the Messiah out of the realm of religious politics into which it had been dragged by His accusers, and talked about it as the fulfilment of God's awesome and eternal purposes. The first part of what He said '*seated at the right hand side of power*' comes from Psalm 110:1,2, which is a well known Messianic text referring to David's deference to the Messiah, as 'Lord'. The second half is all about the fulfilment of the vision of Daniel (7:13) '*I saw one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven*', a picture that has already occurred in Matthew's Gospel (10:23; 16:27-28; 24:30). It may well be that in this very moment, Jesus had a vision of His own glory after His death! Some think that the prophecy in Daniel is about the transfiguration, however, Matthew strongly suggests here that it is a vision of Jesus' coming again in glory; '*when the Son of Man comes in all His glory with His angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory*' (Matt 25:30, and also 19:28).

With this, Jesus gave Caiaphas even more ammunition than he needed. The attempt to find witnesses was largely futile after Jesus said this; using words that would have made the hair stand up on the back of the necks of the Sanhedrin members present; not with excitement as perhaps it should have done, but with fury.

The verdict

The High Priest was regarded as the guardian of the Law of Moses, and it was forbidden for him to tear his clothes even under the harshest of conditions or provocation (Lev 21:10) even though it was a common expression of anger and frustration in those days. Therefore, when Matthew reports Caiaphas as ripping his clothes in frustration at Jesus (26:65), it adds irony to the whole situation. Caiaphas shouted 'blasphemy' at Jesus (26:65) when it was he who was the one who was blaspheming against Jesus, the Son of God, and also blaspheming against the Law by tearing his clothes!

In truth, Caiaphas' fury was not simply because Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah; there were many such claims made around the time of Jesus. What caused Caiaphas to call the verdict of blasphemy himself without even consulting with the Sanhedrin (26:65) was Jesus' equating of Himself with God, using well known Old Testament images of power and glory. In Jesus' day, the name of God, the famous four lettered name of God revealed to Moses as 'JHWH', could not be spoken or pronounced, because it was thought to impugn God's honour. This is how touchy the Jews were about the fear of blasphemy. Jesus had crossed the line of what was acceptable, and they were not even going to check out his life and ministry against scripture themselves to see if His claims were true, before resorting to their accusation.

The penalty for blasphemy according to Leviticus 24:1ff, was death by stoning, but the Sanhedrin knew that if they picked up stones immediately, their position of power with the Romans would be compromised, so they sought to make this the basis of their appeal to the governor the next morning (27:1ff). The immediate alternative to picking up stones was to insult Jesus to His face, hitting Him and spitting on Him. Mark 14:65 indicates that Jesus was blindfolded, making more of the insult; '*prophesy to us, you Messiah! Who hit you?*' (26:68) When faced with the reality of such appalling behaviour, it seems heartless to say that this was a fulfilment of Isaiah 53:6 (and also 50:4-9), yet for us it is important, for we can see yet again that Isaiah accurately foresaw the conditions of humiliation that the Messiah would endure for our sakes, as the suffering servant of God. By His actions, Jesus also fulfilled His own teaching '*do not resist an evildoer ...*' (5:39) and maintained to the end His complete integrity.

Application

The awful nature of what happened to Jesus is a shock to us today. We depend for our security on complicated legal systems under which such an accusation would be inadmissible, and proceedings such as this would seem primitive. But using our imaginations, we have to take ourselves back to a time when justice was meted out at the discretion of privileged individuals who were either self selected or selected by birth. Laws existed for the general good of all, but it was not usually possible for them to be enforced. In this setting, the workings of the Sanhedrin were usually a model of good practice, but in the case of Jesus, they were just inadequate to deal with the trial of the 'Son of God'.

It is within such times that Jesus lived and ultimately faced death, and we will not find the truth by looking at the justice of the matter. Jesus faced death because His words and actions had fermented opposition from the day he began to teach in Galilee, stirring up the wrath of the Pharisees because He did not conform to their expectations of religion and the law. Then, even if we understand this, no-one else in history either can, or has, or will do the same as Jesus, and this is why we say He is unique.

The events that were unfolding were and are unique in history, and we must read them and handle them as such. I emphasise this because we must not treat this story as mere literature or story to be discussed and analysed. Of course, the more we examine these verses the more we will find, but at heart, the whole narrative begs us to respond not just to what we read here, but to the whole Gospel. Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is the Messiah, moreover that He did not force this truth upon people, He gave it to them in person and invited them to Him for who He was.

The art of the evangelist is just like this. It is not to tell people that Jesus is the Christ as if this is a fact that self evidently requires people's response. History shows that people often walk away from such aggressive proclamation as this. Jesus, however, demonstrated the love of God in real life, sufficient to appeal to people to believe that God loves them. Personally, I think that this is why Jesus stood silent before Caiaphas, wanting him to perceive that before him stood no threat, but only love. While Caiaphas could not abide this and condemned Jesus, it is perhaps still best if we stand before the world with the evidence of the love of God. People will then condemn themselves or respond to the God to whom we testify, and we will have been faithful to the testimony of our Lord.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this story tell us about Jesus, and the nature of His ordeal for our salvation?
2. Discuss the legal processes to which Jesus was subjected in this story. Do similar things happen in the world today, and if so, where?
3. Imagine yourself in the position of the different characters in this Scripture. What might each one have felt, and why?

Topics covered by this text

- *Opposition to Jesus*
- *The trial of Jesus and accusations against Him*
- *The true nature of blasphemy*
- *Jesus' response to the accusation that He is the Messiah*

Personal comments by author

Every time I read this passage I find myself mentally 'taking cover' with Peter in the courtyard; wanting to know what is happening, but somewhat scared of all that is going on. The scenario is so appalling, I find it hard to imagine. Yet as a disciple of Jesus Christ living in the real world of our own day, there are many things going on, unfortunately, of equal injustice and horror. Jesus Christ cannot be put on trial again, but He is there with everyone who faces extreme injustice, and all of us who cower like Peter in the courtyard must come out and face reality.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Take the opportunity to think back over your own life and consider those occasions when you have been like Peter, an observer to what God is doing in the world rather than a participant in it. What can you do today to make sure that you do not find yourself hiding from what the Lord calls you to do?*
- *Pray for God's people today. Pray that the Church (generally) will stand back from acting like a religious institution with its own interests, and pursuing them in such a way as prevents God's work being done instead of enabling it.*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, when I am scared and do not know what to do, take hold of my timid soul and lead me out by the bright light of Your guidance. Take away from me the luxury of self pity and face me with the reality of my duties and obligations, so that I might do what is right and serve you and others, whatever the circumstances. Give me a heart that always willing to yield to Your hand. AMEN
