

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 26 (PART 4)

Matthew 26:57-68 - Jesus On Trial

High Priest (Caiaphas) (v. 57) - Caiaphas was the acting High Priest in Jerusalem and central authority presiding over Jesus' trial. As both a political and religious leader, appointed by Rome, he held significant influence and was responsible for safeguarding Jewish law and worship. In this passage, however, he functions less as a neutral judge and more as a determined prosecutor, pressing Jesus for a statement that could justify a charge of blasphemy. His actions reveal a leader more concerned with preserving power and stability than pursuing truth or justice.

Scribes (v. 57) - The scribes were experts in the Jewish Law, trained to interpret, teach, and apply the Scriptures. They carried intellectual and theological authority among the people and were often seen as guardians of biblical truth. In Jesus' trial, they are present as part of the legal and religious establishment, helping assess testimony and reinforce the case against Him. Ironically, those most skilled in understanding Scripture fail to recognize that Jesus is its fulfillment.

Elders (v. 57) - The elders were respected leaders within the Jewish community, often representing families, tribes, and local influence. While not necessarily religious professionals like priests or scribes, they held social & cultural authority. Their presence at the trial signals that this was not just a religious proceeding but a broader leadership decision involving the nation's representatives. They lend weight & legitimacy, even though the process is deeply flawed.

Chief Priests (v. 59) - The chief priests were high-ranking members of the priestly class, responsible for overseeing temple worship and maintaining religious order. Many were part of the aristocratic elite and worked closely with Roman authorities to preserve stability. In this passage, they take an active role in seeking false testimony against Jesus, revealing that their opposition is driven not only by theological concerns but also by a desire to protect their position and control, especially in light of Jesus' challenges to the temple system.

The Council (Sanhedrin) (v. 59) - The council, or Sanhedrin, was the highest governing body of Jewish leadership, made up of chief priests, scribes, and elders. Functioning as both a religious and legal court, it held authority over major decisions affecting the Jewish people. In Jesus' trial, the Sanhedrin serves as the body that ultimately condemns Him. However, rather than conducting a fair & lawful inquiry, the council appears to be seeking justification for a predetermined verdict, exposing a system that is protecting its own interests over pursuing justice.

When you put all of this together, every major human authority structure in Israel is aligned against Jesus - Religious authority (scribes), spiritual leadership (priests), community leadership (elders), national court (Sanhedrin), and the nation's top authority (Caiaphas).

Jewish Trial Procedures

Matthew records the “trial” of Jesus before these leaders. As modern readers of this event, especially Christians familiar with the story, we may not fully grasp the unusual and hypocritical way this proceeding develops. To understand what the “norm” was, it’s worth taking some time to look at the writings which guided the Jewish people at this time, compiled in a doc. called the Mishnah.

The Mishnah was finalized after the time of Jesus but was based on the practices that were common during the time of Jesus. So while these guidelines may not be exactly how every case was handled, it shows us how things typically would have, *should* have been handled.

The Mishnah presents a legal system that prioritizes thorough examination, agreement of witnesses, and deliberate pacing, safeguards meant to prevent unjust condemnation and protect the accused. It records how trials like Jesus’ were supposed to work. Here are some relevant sections of the Mishnah (particularly the section titled “Tractate Sanhedrin”), where we get a picture of how Jewish courts were *intended* to function in serious cases - as well as what *actually* happened in Jesus’ trial.

1. Serious Warning to Witnesses (Value of Life) - Sanhedrin 4:5 - *“Therefore was man created single... to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul of Israel, Scripture accounts it as though he had destroyed a whole world; and whoever saves a single soul of Israel, Scripture accounts it as though he had saved a whole world.”*

Witness testimony in capital cases carried enormous weight, this is not casual or flexible.

Jesus’ Trial: Leaders actively seek false testimony, Jesus is mocked, struck & abused. (26:59-60, 67)

2. Witnesses Are Carefully Examined (Not Assumed) - Sanhedrin 5:1 - *“How do they examine the witnesses? They bring them in and admonish them... and then they examine them with great care.”*

Testimony is not quickly accepted, instead it is to be tested, warned, and scrutinized.

Jesus’ Trial: Many false witnesses came forward. And the two that are quoted in the trial are quoting Jesus without proper context and understanding. (26:59-60)

3. Inconsistent Testimony Invalidates the Case - Sanhedrin 5:2 - *“If one says, ‘I saw him at such an hour,’ and another says, ‘I saw him at another hour,’ their testimony is invalid.”*

If witnesses don’t agree, the case falls apart → no conviction. That’s what happened in normal situations, but in this case, the leaders push forward anyway.

Jesus’ Trial: Here’s what Mark records:

Mark 14:55-56 - Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, and they were not finding any. 56 For many were giving false testimony against Him, but their testimony was not consistent.

4. Bias Toward Acquittal (Not Conviction) - Sanhedrin 4:1 - “In capital cases they commence with [arguments for] acquittal and not with [arguments for] conviction.”

The system is intentionally tilted toward protecting the accused.

Jesus’ Trial: In Jesus’ case, look at the mindset of his accusers: “The chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death.” (26:59)

Instead of beginning with a posture of protecting the accused, the leaders begin with a goal: secure a guilty verdict.

5. Conviction Requires Delay (No Same-Day Verdict) - Sanhedrin 4:1 - “In capital cases they may acquit on the same day, but they may not convict until the following day.”

Time is built in to prevent rushed, emotional decisions.

Jesus’ Trial: The verdict is reached immediately without any of the safeguards that could temper a rushed (and incorrect) decision.

Matthew 26:65-66 - Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; 66 what do you think?" They answered, "He deserves death!"

6. Order of Judgment (Preventing Influence) - Sanhedrin 4:2 - “In capital cases they begin [giving opinions] from the side [aka the lesser members first].”

Junior members speak first so senior leaders don’t dominate or sway the outcome.

Jesus’ Trial: The High Priest leads the questioning and declares the charge and reaction. Instead of careful, independent deliberation, the process is controlled from the top, with the High Priest driving the outcome. (26:62-65)

Other Trial Details

Jesus is mostly silent during his trial with one exception. Jesus responds once, when the high priest says: “I adjure you by the living God that you tell us whether you are the Christ...” (**26:63**). Why does Jesus respond at this moment? Because he is obedient to Scripture even in this dark moment:

Leviticus 5:1 - 'Now if a person sins after he hears a public adjuration to testify when he is a witness, whether he has seen or otherwise known, if he does not tell it, then he will bear his guilt.

There is one final scriptural detail about the high priest’s actions which only further indicts the religious leaders and their egregious hypocrisy and neglect of God’s ways. Do you remember the reaction of the high priest after Jesus quotes Psalm 110 and Daniel 7? “Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has blasphemed! (26:65).”

At first glance this seems like an emotional response or dramatic expression of grief. But in fact it was disobedience to the Mosaic Law:

Leviticus 21:10 - 'The priest who is the highest among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not uncover his head nor tear his clothes;

What a contrast between the perfect Messiah and the supposed holy high priest!

Q - What is the trial really all about?

Q - What crime/sin do the religious leaders accuse Jesus of?

The religious leaders think they are in charge, that they are the judges & determiners of Jesus' fate. But Jesus is unafraid & unmoved in the face of their lies, accusations & even their physical abuse.

The only utterance in this section from Jesus is a quotation of two foundational Messianic passages from the Old Testament, Psalm 110:1 & Daniel 7:13 (v. 64). Though Jesus has been arrested, shackled and beaten, he knows this is not the end nor his destiny. And he declares such to the powerless men who think they are anything but powerless. And when he speaks, they can't handle it.

The sad irony of this moment is that it reveals clearly the need for this moment. The religious leaders, including the high priest, don't really know God's will or plan. Their actions are fueled by jealousy, envy, and clinging to power. They are violating the commands of God in this very moment and on top of that, violating their own standards which were crafted to point them to good and right actions. They make peace with falsehood and conspire with liars. They have arrived at this trial at night so as to not look bad in the eyes of the people they are supposed to be leading and serving. They are trying to play both sides of things, managing their appearance while committing injustice.

And when the embodiment of God's love and word and plan and heart stands before them, they hate it. They are the next in a long generational line of people who "honor (God) with their lips, but their hearts are far from (him)" (Isaiah 29:13).

And that is why the son of God was sent. And that is why the son of God was sacrificed.

Our best systems, our best intentions, and our most religious efforts still fall short. So the Son of God came to do what we could not do, to stand in our place, to bear our sin, and to make a way for us to truly know God. They think they are ending his life, but the truth is, he is giving it.