

Jesus Christ's Trial (Part One)

The Jewish Trial

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Given 16-Feb-13; Sermon #1143

I do not know how you might have described the arrest of Jesus Christ in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before His crucifixion had you have been there to observe it. I do not know the perspective you might have had. If you are Caiaphas, you would doubtless have reported it as a triumph, "At last we have seized Him." Or if you were a captain of a band of soldiers who actually carried out the arrest, you might have reported it quite factually, "14 of Nissan; just before midnight; arrested one prisoner: Jesus of Nazareth."

I do know, however, that if you were the apostle John and if you had been inspired in your writing by the Holy Spirit, as he was, you would have reported that from the beginning to the end, Jesus, not His captors, was in complete charge of the situation.

He was the one who delayed in the Garden while the arresting party was coming. He was the one who went forth to meet them, thereby surrendering Himself voluntarily. And even at the very moment of the arrest, He showed His control over circumstances because He demonstrated power towards the soldiers, grace towards His own disciples, and mercy to those who were His enemies.

John 18:3 Then Judas, having received a detachment of troops, and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, came there with lanterns, torches, and weapons.

It is an outrageous situation; men with weapons coming forward to arrest the Son of God, and John does not allow us to miss the irony. We remember, for example, that it is John who has stressed more than any other gospel writer that Jesus is "the light of the world." He made that clear in the opening chapter where the word "light," in reference to Jesus, occurs six times in just nine verses. Later John quotes twice Christ's own claim to be "the light of the world." You find that in John 8:12 and John 9:5.

Those in the darkness come in the darkness with lanterns and torches to seek Him out. In addition they come with weapons; from His enemies' point of view, they no doubt thought it to be very necessary. Christ's enemies were afraid of Him and worried about what might happen if He chose to resist them. They had a right to be worried. If He chose to resist them, no amount of weapons would have been enough to force Jesus to do anything He did not want to do.

Jesus was arrested, as John clearly indicates, because He willingly chose to give Himself up to die to save us. Today also, those who were the enemies of Christ depend on equally foolish lights and weapons. It is not literal lamps that people rely on today of course, but rather the light of progress or the light of reason under the influence of the one who transformed himself into an angel of light through deception. However valuable these lights may seem in purely human terms, they are clearly foolish when arrayed against the One who is the "light of the world."

This kind of thinking is nothing but foolishness when we fail to acknowledge Him, as Paul indicates in Romans 1 when he says:

Romans 1:21-22 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools.

Similar human weapons which the enemies of Christ frequently resort to when reason fails are also totally useless. Now John is not especially interested in the weakness of men; however what he is really interested in is the power of Jesus Christ, which he conveys by quite an extraordinary incident. It is an incident that none of the other gospel writers relates.

John writes that Jesus, having seen the approaching soldiers and knowing all that was in store for Him, went to them and initiated the arrest by a question. That question was: "whom are you seeking?"

John 18:4-6 Jesus therefore, knowing all things that would come upon Him, went forward and said to them, "Whom are you seeking?" They answered Him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am He." And Judas, who betrayed Him, also stood with them. Now when He said to them, "I am He," they drew back and fell to the ground.

Now it must have been dark in the Garden in spite of the full moon of Passover, or else a supernatural blindness had been placed upon Christ's enemies because they did not recognize Him; and if they had, they would have replied, "You! We seek you." Instead they answered "Jesus of Nazareth," which indicated they did not know which one was Jesus.

At this point, according to John, Jesus answered by saying, "I am." *He* is not in the original Greek text here; it is just "I am." Immediately we are told that the arresting party drew back and fell to the ground where they remained until Jesus apparently released them by asking them this question again a second time.

John 18:7-8 Then He asked them again, "Whom are you seeking?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way." [He was speaking of his disciples.]

Now what produces the strange reaction? Could it be that, as some commentators in ignorance have argued, that it is really not a miracle? Nevertheless there have been cases where the hand of an evil person has been stayed momentarily by the innocence or overbearing presence of the one to be victimized.

Kings have sometimes had this effect on mere soldiers of the enemy. Executioners have sometimes been unable to strike an innocent person. It is doubtful, though, that thoughts like these would have caused Christ's captors to fall back in dismay or dread. I just cannot imagine that explanation by some of these deceived commentators.

John does not merely say that the officers and soldiers paused for a moment in their effort to arrest Jesus. He says that they actually stepped backwards and fell to the ground. Also, and this is of great importance, they did so in response not merely to Christ's presence, but rather to the majestic words He spoke: "I Am" which probably sent a shiver through their spines.

Is this significant? It is if we remember that the meaning of the name—the Great Name of God, Yahweh—revealed to Moses at the burning bush at the time of God's commissioning him to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt: “I am that I am.” It is a form of the verb “to be,” meaning His existence yesterday, today, and forever.

Therefore when Jesus replied to His enemies by saying “I am,” He was using His own great divine name, Yahweh; the name above every name; hearing this name spoken by Christ (through the arresting party and amidst other confusion) rendered them helpless even to stand before Him.

Here in Philippians 2:

Philippians 2:9-11 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

It is a great contrast—this revelation of the glory and the power of Jesus at the very moment of His arrest in Gethsemane. It is only one more example of the paradox of the incarnation found throughout the pages of the Word of God. We look to His birth and see a picture of human weakness—a baby lying in a manger, but we turn to the fields of Bethlehem and find the birth announcement announced by the angels. He is of humble birth, but an angel leads Eastern kings to present their gold, frankincense, and myrrh to not only this weak child, but also this wonderful and great and awesome King.

At His baptism, He identified himself with those who repent of their sins, but He had no sin, and a voice from heaven is heard declaring, “This is My Son whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.” In another situation, He is so exalted that He falls asleep in the back of a boat that soon is pitching wildly in a storm on Galilee. The disciples, who are seasoned fishermen, are frightened, and they wake Him and He immediately calms the waves showing them His mighty power even as a human being and God.

And at the grave of Lazarus, Jesus weeps, but then He speaks the Word in power and the dead man is resurrected. Also, in the Garden He prays in agony that if it is possible, “this cup” would pass from Him, but moments later He confronts His enemies and overpowers them with the sheer force of His presence.

This strange blending of seeming opposites is a clue to the first reason why Jesus did what He did on this occasion of His arrest. It was to show, at this important moment, that He was more than man. Man, yes, but also God manifested in flesh. He would have it known that it was God as well as man and that He was about to die for our salvation. He must be a man to die, but He must also be God if that death was to be adequate as a ransom price for our sin. He declares this at the moment of His capture.

Now the second reason why Jesus did what He did was this incident of His display of power over His enemies shows His death is voluntary and not coerced. If He had been unwilling to die, no amount of troops or weapons could have ever forced Him. He could have walked away as He did on a number of former occasions.

Finally, the third reason why Jesus did what He did was to make it clear that those who were arresting Him and those who stood behind their actions by commanding it, were without excuse. They would have no doubt that they were dealing with someone who was supernatural.

Now some in the arresting party may never have seen Christ before, but they will never be able to plead that they were without any indication as to who He was. They were not ignorant of His divine glory, therefore if they continued on their way after He released them from their bondage to His power, it was because they did not want to recognize or heed the truth, not because it was unknown to them. He made it very clear to those who arrested Him and those who carried out the trials.

So also will it be in the day of Christ's second coming. In that day, too, will His deity be made manifest and the guilt and sinful intransigence of man will be exposed. It will be a day of judgment.

There is also a second feature John points out at the arrest of Christ that the other gospel writers overlook. Christ commands the officers and soldiers that since it is He they have come to take, His disciples should be allowed to go their way. This is a statement of grace on behalf of His disciples.

John 18:8-9 Jesus answered, "I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way," that the saying might be fulfilled which He spoke, "Of those whom You gave Me I have lost none."

Those whom He had protected were allowed to go their own way so that Jesus' prophesy would be fulfilled. John's reference is to Jesus' statements in John 6 and also John 17. Now please turn back to John 6. He writes:

John 6:39 This is the will of the Father who sent Me [I am quoting Jesus], that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.

John 17:12 While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

So, this was prophesied ahead of time. He would make sure that His disciples were not harmed on that evening or while He was overseeing them and protecting them.

When John calls attention to the statements of Christ given earlier, he is of course broadening the protecting grace of Christ from this one incident, in which only the eleven disciples were protected, to include that general exercise of God's grace by which all of Christ's people are saved.

It is true that Christ did protect the eleven, because without a doubt these soldiers and officers had intended to arrest the disciples, too. And we know this because Mark tells us of their intent to seize a certain young man.

Mark 14:51-52 Now a certain young man followed Him [that is Jesus], having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body. And the young men laid hold of him, and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked.

Nevertheless, as John quotes Jesus on this occasion, he is also aware that this is just one small example of a greater protection by which Jesus constantly preserves those of all ages whom the

Father has given Him. Which is very, very encouraging to each and every one of us—the protection is there and no one can take that away unless God Himself removes it.

How does Jesus exercise this persevering grace towards those who believe in Him? Well, here are three verses that tell us what God is able to do, and therefore will do, for His people and for us.

Hebrews 7:25 Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Philippians 3:20-21 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.

And the third scripture I wanted to give you is in Jude.

Jude 24-25 Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.

So we have that guarantee, the same guarantee that we see manifested or carried out that night that Jesus was arrested. Even with that, He was still looking out for His disciples and was in control of the situation. He asked that they be permitted to leave and go their own way.

When we put these verses together, they tell us that Jesus shows His effective, persevering grace with us by lifting us from the darkness of this world and into His marvelous light, by interceding for us in heaven, by guarding our spiritual deposits, by seeing us through temptation and by bringing us, at last and without blemish, into the presence of His own and the Father's glory.

Now there is one final incident in John's account of Christ's arrest that is unlike the first two incidents narrated by each of the other gospel writers. It concerns Peter, who, when he saw that Jesus was about to be arrested, quickly drew the sword he was wearing and swung it at the young man leading the column. We are all very familiar with this incident; it is a shocking one, and also a tremendous miracle is associated with it as well.

No doubt Peter intended to strike off his head, but the young man, Malchus, ducked and lost only his ear. Malchus was a servant of the high priest Caiaphas who was very active in the arrest and trial of Jesus. Luke 22:51 tells us, in reporting the full account, that Jesus then touched his ear and healed him. John adds that Christ also rebuked Peter. So we will pick it up in verse 10.

John 18:10-11 Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus. So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?"

There again we see very clearly that Christ is in charge, and He knew exactly what was transpiring that evening. One lesson we find in this incident is the foolishness of a humanly devised defense of God with no regard for God's will. Peter's zeal for Christ was not based on true knowledge, which was the inevitable outcome of his failure in the preceding hours, to observe Christ's command to him

to watch and pray. That was the instruction that Peter and the other disciples received: “Watch and pray.” There was no statement or command to defend Him.

Matthew 26:41 Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Peter showed that weak flesh at that time. Peter was courageous but ignorant. Later, he would not even be courageous because he would deny Christ. Peter failed and so will we if our zeal is not cultivated on the knowledge that Christ's gives and if our zeal is not strengthened by Him.

We can see this in many of the churches in the world. They go off half-cocked, believing they are preaching the gospel to the world and doing God's work, but it is not according to God's will. All our actions must be according to God's will, and we have to think them through, which Peter did not do at that time. He is an admirable man, but he failed that time.

Now this and other lessons aside, surely the greatest truth of this incident is that Jesus was here showing mercy even to His enemies, even at the time they came to thrust Him toward His execution. In verse 11, Jesus speaks of the “cup the Father gives me,” and it is one of two cups spoken of often in scripture. One, is the cup of salvation, which is mentioned in Psalm 116.

Psalm 116:13 I will take up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord.

The other cup is the cup of God's wrath or tribulation which is referred to here in verse 11. Earlier Jesus had prayed that this cup might pass from Him. Two cups: the cup of salvation and the cup of God's wrath. Every person who has ever lived will drink from one of them, but those who drink from the cup of salvation by God's grace will drink of it only because Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath in their place. So we can be very thankful for that!

Now let us continue in verses 12-14 of John 18. This begins the part that talks about coming before the high priest.

John 18:12-14 Then the detachment of troops and the captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound Him. And they led Him away to Annas first, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year. Now it was Caiaphas who advised the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.

There is something about trials, particularly great trials, which set precedent and determine the flow of history; it uniquely captures and enthralls people's minds. This unique interest in the outcome of some monumental trial is observable in ancient history and in our own enduring interest in those ancient events that happened to Christ. But no trial has so challenged the Western world and so charges our emotions as that trial of Jesus Christ by the Jewish and Roman authorities in Palestine.

Other trials were passive and routine compared with the trial and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is an outstanding trial, it is an extraordinary trial; none has ever been like it. And because of its obvious implications, the trial of Jesus is of greater importance than any other trial in the history of mankind.

Now let us look at a general overview of the events in which the trial, actually *trials*, because there was more than one that took place. These trials have four main features. This is speaking of all the trials. I apologize in advance because I am going to give you a quite a few points.

The first feature was the arrest, which we briefly covered earlier. A mob who were guided by Judas and led by the chief priests and the captains of the temple came out with swords and clubs to arrest Jesus. This took place very late, somewhere around 11 o'clock or 12 o'clock at night on Passover AD 31.

The second feature was the Jewish trial. This had three separate stages. In the first stage of the Jewish trial, there was a preliminary hearing and examination by night before Annas. This is what John seems to be describing, in his gospel, though the issue is somewhat confused due to his use of the phrase "high priest" for both Annas and Caiaphas.

The second part of the trial was conducted by Caiaphas. The reason for this double use of the reference, high priest, was because according to Jewish law, the high priest held his office for life. But the Romans under whose indulgence the Jewish system government was allowed to function—albeit somewhat impoverished—had displaced high priests who were not to their liking and had put others in their place.

So at the time of Jesus Christ's arrest, there were Caiaphas, the Roman appointee, and Annas, the elder high priest who would have been recognized as the true high priest by all Jews and others who have been appointed by the Romans and afterward deposed.

Apparently John describes the appearance of Jesus before Annas, at which time Jesus refused to testify against Himself and was therefore unjustly struck by a minor court officer.

John 18:19-24 The high priest then asked Jesus about His disciples and His doctrine. Jesus answered him, "I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said." And when He had said these things, one of the officers who stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, "Do You answer the high priest like that?" Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?" Then Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now I am just giving you a summary of these things so you can get it organized in your mind. The second stage of the Jewish trial was before Caiaphas, to whom Annas had sent Jesus when he perceived that his own method of interrogation was fruitless. This predawn, informal trial before the Sanhedrin and Caiaphas was the significant trial. Therefore it is the one described at length by Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Now various witnesses were brought forth who could not agree on their testimony and were therefore dismissed. So the trial was merely towards a swift motion of acquittal. But then, Caiaphas himself intervened illegally to charge the prisoner under oath.

You do not have to turn here for sake of time, but in Matthew 26 it says:

Matthew 26:63-64 But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" [Now, Jesus, who was not under any obligation to testify against Himself, but who nevertheless refused this official challenge in the name of God, replied to Caiaphas in verse 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.”

So Jesus was immediately convicted of blasphemy by a unanimous votes and claims were made that Jesus was deserving of death, and there is a lot wrong with that which we will get to later.

The third and final stage of the Jewish trial took place the following morning at daybreak. The pertinent questioning of the previous night was reiterated, formally, and a judgment secured. The fate of the trial involved the entire Sanhedrin—the highest court of Judaism. This ratification of Christ's condemnation was an effort to make Christ's trial legal in appearance. We will get to more of that later.

Now, the third feature of these final events was the Roman trial. This was necessary, because although the Jewish court could convict, it could not execute, and therefore had to seek Roman concurrence in its verdict. This trial also had three parts.

1. The prearranged appearance before Pilate. Here the anticipations of the Jewish leaders seem to be frustrated, because rather than preceding with pro forma trial and judgment, which the leaders had been led to expect, Pilate suddenly balked and tried to free the prisoner.
2. The appearance before Herod. When Pilate heard that Jesus was a Galilean, he tried to escape responsibility by sending Jesus to an authority who was thought to have better jurisdiction. However Herod sent Jesus back. So they were tossing him like a political hot potato, so to speak, back and forth.
3. Jesus was actually given over to crucifixion. Even though He had not been convicted of anything and was in fact pronounced innocent, (this part was before Pilate). The Roman trial is recorded by all of the gospel writers.
4. The fourth and final feature of all these events was the crucifixion—the execution of the sentence of the two courts.

It is evident from this brief survey of the features of Christ's arrest, trial, and execution, that the first major concern with these events should be the Jewish trial. But it is impossible to understand this trial apart from at least a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew law and legal practice. So we have to get into the nitty-gritty of this.

This is not the easiest subject of which to give a brief explanation. To begin with there is a double basis for the Hebrew law. The Mosaic law, the Pentateuch, and the Talmud, or oral law. The Talmud is not written, it is oral.

The Talmudic law is of great value and is very complex. It has two parts: the Mishnah, the basic law, and the Gemara, which is what we would call a commentary on the law. Now the relation between the Gemara and the Mishnah might be compared to the debate over proposed law in the United States Congress, preserved in the congressional record, and the law that resulted. This law was a very well established law and one of the finest, if not *the* finest law the world has ever seen, from a human standpoint. You will see why a little later.

We need only to deal with Hebrew law in the matter of a crime punishable by death, a capital offense, not with the many other hundreds of matters dealt within the Talmud.

Many scholars have already sifted through this material and summarized the relevant principles admirably, so we do not have to do it from scratch. We will consider them under several categories.

The first relevant principal category is: The court in capital cases. Now the only court authorized to sit in capital cases in Israel was the great Sanhedrin or grand counsel. It had 71 members and convened at Jerusalem. Its name is derived from the Greek word *sunedrion*, which denoted a legislative body gathered together to debate in a deliberate or sitting posture. It did not debate merely from the interference of Greek culture upon the Hebrew people. Jewish tradition placed the founding of the great Sanhedrin in the wilderness under Moses. I do not know what the continuation is, whether it is direct or they renamed it or what the case was, but that is what the Jewish tradition claims—the great Sanhedrin extend back to the wilderness under Moses.

In Numbers 11 records God's instruction to Moses to gather together 70 of Israel's elders to perform judicial functions. It was actually 70 plus Moses, so it was 71 members.

Numbers 11:16-17 So the Lord said to Moses: “Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you. Then I will come down and talk with you there. I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone.

Whatever its history the Sanhedrin certainly existed and was vested with the highest authority in religious and other national matters in Israel, except for the authority of Rome at the time of Jesus.

The Sanhedrin was organized traditionally in three chambers. 1) A chamber of 23 priests, 2) A chamber of 23 scribes, 3) A chamber of 23 elders. Though often this is not strictly followed, to these chambers two presiding officers were added making the total of 71. The three chambers represented the religious, legal, and the democratic elements of Jewish life. This three-fold division is referred to by Jesus in Matthew 16.

Matthew 16:21 From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes [those are the 3 chambers. Christ was well aware of the legal system.], and be killed and be raised the third day.

The second relevant principle category is: Qualification of Judges. Since members of the great Sanhedrin alone were authorized to judge capital cases, the qualifications for membership in the Sanhedrin are therefore synonymous with qualifications for such judges.

Some of these qualifications were obvious. The member of the Sanhedrin was to be a Hebrew of the Hebrews—a full-blooded Jew, born of two Jewish parents or Israelitish parents.

Now he was to be *learned* in law and have had prior legal experience. He had to be a linguist, because trials of those who did not speak Hebrew would not take place and interpreters were not

allowed in Jewish courts. He must be humble and of good reputation. And most important, he was not to sit if he had any personal interest in the outcome of the trial.

As I went through this, I thought if we could have such a system today it would sure solve a lot of problems. We do have a similar system today; it is just not being followed. But this is one very well laid out law, and they had to follow it very closely in the trial of Jesus. I said *trial* because, the Jewish trial was covered by this law, and the Roman trial was covered by Roman law. But we will get to that later.

So if he, the judge, had any personal interest in the outcome of the trial, he could not be part of the trial. Thus even a well-qualified member of the Sanhedrin would have to step aside temporarily if he was related to the defendant or stood to benefit from a verdict.

The third relevant principle category is: Witnesses. I found this very interesting. The qualification of the witnesses and their role in legal proceedings is perhaps the most interesting feature of Jewish law, because unlike the previous matters mentioned, this Jewish law took a course strikingly different from Roman law and the derivative legal systems that we know today in the Western world.

There are two qualifying characteristics for witnesses. 1) The role of witnesses was considerably more important than the trials we know today. In our trials, a witness is so called upon to testify merely to what he knows, and the total case is made up of the collective testimony of whatever number of witnesses is necessary to establish the defendant's guilt or innocence.

This was not true in Israel. In Hebrew law the testimony of the witnesses had to be complete. That is, it had to pertain to the whole of the crime of which the defendant was accused. He could not just see a portion of it.

Even where there appeared to be a legal number of duly qualified witnesses, the testimony was insufficient to convict unless they agreed not only with regard to the prisoner's offense but also with regard to the mode of committing it. So they could not only see the act that happened, they had to see things that led up to it.

Biblical law does not subject a person to capital or even to corporal punishment unless all witnesses charge him with one and the same criminal act with statements fully agreeing in the main circumstances and declaring that they saw one another while seeing him engaged in the crime. Now that is detailed. There is a lot of logic in this, and it saves a lot of false indictments.

Now we are not done with witnesses yet; the second qualifying characteristic is: 2) there must be two or more witnesses to convict. This next one is an obvious one in any legal system; but in Judaism, it was carried to a heightened degree in that the witnesses had to agree on each particular or else the accused was to be discharged immediately.

Here, certain formulas or questions were used. Two sets of questions: Hakiroth and Bedikoth. An examination of the witnesses, separately, in matters pertaining to the time and place of the alleged crime was called the Hakiroth, and it consisted of 7 set questions:

1. Was it a year of jubilee?
2. Was it in an ordinary year?

3. In what month?
4. On what day of the month?
5. At what hour?
6. In what place
7. Do you identify this person?

Now, the Bedikoth embraced all matters not brought out in the first series of questions. In constituted what we might call a cross examination. This was taken with the utmost seriousness and rigor.

So if one witness's testimony veered from another testimony in even the slightest of these particulars, their testimony was immediately declared invalid. So, you are innocent until proven guilty to the *n*th degree under Jewish law.

The third qualifying characteristic for witnesses under Jewish law: 3) The witnesses must themselves be the accusers. This means that there were no prosecutors in Hebrew courts; no lawyers for the state. Instead those who had seen the crime were to arrange for the arrest of the criminal and present the accusation before the nation's judges.

Finally, it is important to notice that Jewish law requires that they were also to have explicitly warned the defendant of the potential legal consequence of his/her crime immediately before the crime was committed. That was the responsibilities of the witnesses and those who brought him before the trial. This provision of the law was termed: antecedent warning.

It seems to have had three purposes: 1) To protect the potential offender against his own ignorance and rashness and therefore deter the crime if possible. 2) To aid in establishing criminal intent at the later trial. 3) To assist the judges in assessing the proper penalty.

So far as is known, this maxim has no counterpart in any judicial system of any nation, either ancient or modern, and is so stringent that it is hard to imagine how the death penalty could have been secured against anyone in Israel, except under the most extreme and unusual circumstances. That was precisely its intent because the Jews regarded the life of an Israelite so highly that almost anything that could possibly head off an execution was rigorously used.

The Mishnah says, "The Sanhedrin which so often as once in seven years condemns a man to death in a slaughter house." Now keep in mind in the Old Testament that there are laws for certain sins that are punishable by death, and if that is done then the degree of punishment is already established in that way, but it is sure hard to get to that point in Jewish law.

Now the forth relevant principal category is: Mode of trial. The mode of trial in capital cases will be considered more completely later regarding Jesus' actual trial. Let me give you 5 basic requirements:

1. It was to be conducted between the offering of the morning sacrifice and the offering of the evening sacrifice. In daylight and with a reminder that all that was done was to be done within the clear view of God and by those who stood in the proper relationship to him.

2. The judges were never to seek to condemn the accused, but were by contrast to take his side and seek every means for his acquittal.
3. The accused could not be convicted by a mere majority, but rather a majority of two, that is 37 of the total 71 judges, was necessary.
4. By strange contrast, a unanimous vote for condemnation was also invalid. If everyone said that he was guilty, something was wrong, because there was no one to take up his defense. This was not just to be an emotional decision based on mob action.
5. The initial guilty vote on the sentence could not be pronounced on the same day.

You begin to get a picture of what Christ's trial was like and how many things were actually dismissed. We will get to those at a later time.

So assuming that the trial led to condemnation, the assembly was then adjourned while each man went home to consider if something had not been overlooked that could bring acquittal. Only after a night had passed and the court was reassembled and a new vote taken could the sentence be passed and the execution followed.

Now even as the death march left the great horror of the Sanhedrin, the judges would continue to seek for new arguments. If one occurred, the procession was immediately recalled and the new evidence considered. This is following the Jewish law of the trial.

Now the point of this is that Jesus was not condemned under a primitive, barbaric, or even an inadequate judicial system, but under the very best there has ever been. If someone was going to be defended or going to be found innocent, it was certainly going to be under this.

Jesus Christ, the righteous One, the one who on one occasion demanded which of His enemies was able to convict Him of sin and left them speechless, was condemned to death by the most merciful and careful system of judicial processes known to man.

If we ask, as we must, how could that happen? How could the very Son of God be condemned? The answer is simply that the problem, then as now, is not so much in the system itself as it is in the hearts of those who interpret and implement the system and its codes.

As Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?" This is what circumvents the law or, as in this case, actually uses the law to destroy the innocent. Jesus Christ, the innocent One, was condemned for those who were guilty so that a way would open up for sinners to be able, upon repentance and accepting Christ as their personal Savior, to be forgiven for their sins by the blood of Christ and by the grace of God. How merciful is God!

If the conduct of the high priest and Temple officers and the leaders of the Sanhedrin were not so reprehensible and their characters so base, a person might feel tempted to feel sorry for them as they stumbled to convict Jesus Christ of crimes worthy of death. They were so ignorant; so blinded by Satan and their own human nature.

For one thing, they were obviously unprepared for the trial. If they planned to arrest and try Jesus during this week, they would have done it earlier in the week when they would have had the

necessary time required for such a trial under Jewish law. But instead they acted suddenly and at a relatively late hour.

That they did was due only to the message brought to them from the upper room by Judas. But this found them unprepared, yet they were so intent on acting on it, they just forgot even the law that they supposedly protected.

Again, there is the matter of witnesses. Where, in Jerusalem, in the middle of the night, were they to find witnesses to Jesus' alleged crimes? The judges could not be witnesses themselves; Jewish law prohibited it.

Witnesses would have been rounded up quickly from those who might have heard Christ say some incriminating thing. But this would have to be done with the knowledge that the best witnesses to Christ's speech and actions were probably scattered all over the country, in those many towns and villages where Jesus had conducted His ministry.

Also even when these witnesses were found, they would still have to provide evidence according to the strict demands of Jewish law. Perhaps in the sudden excitement of the moment, the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes thought that Jesus being shocked and overcome by the arrest might possibly prove to be His own accuser.

But their hopes along this line were quickly shattered as John, the only gospel writer that records the first segment of the Jewish trial, reports in the segment in front of Annas. Annas conducted what we would call a preliminary hearing.

They asked Jesus about His disciples and His teachings. Jesus refused to answer this series of questions, thereby indicating that He knew Jewish law. Accusations must come from witnesses and not from the accused. He therefore intended to be tried properly, if at all, by the laws of Israel.

Now reading again,

John 18:19-23 The high priest then asked Jesus about His disciples and His doctrine. Jesus answered him, "I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said." And when He had said these things, one of the officers who stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, "Do You answer the high priest like that?" Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?"

He knew the law. He knew that He was not required by law. In fact, He was required not to speak in this case. Now this was not an evasive answer, though it may sound so to us; it was merely a demand to be tried properly under the law.

It becomes clear at this point that the court was partial because although Jesus had spoken correctly and according to His right under law, one of the court officers immediately turned and struck Him for what he considered to be Christ's impudence.

And instead of replying angrily, Jesus merely repeated His previous position. If there had been any more wrong doing, it should be brought forward legally and established by witnesses; even the blow He had received had been improper and in contempt of the law. So we can take advice from this and do the same if we are ever brought before the law of the land.

Now we do not know much about Annas, who conducted this preliminary hearing, but he appears to be just a bit more upright than his unscrupulous son-in-law, Caiaphas. Nevertheless, Annas had met with a resolute refusal by Jesus to testify against Himself. Recognizing that Jesus both knew the law and would obviously not be terrified in a forced mistake by silly court brutality, Annas assumed that there was nothing more that he could do, so he sent the prisoner to Caiaphas.

John 18:24 Then Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

At this point, although John does not record it, the serious part of the trial began. It is this segment that Matthew, Mark, and Luke give us. Caiaphas presided.

Now there were many illegalities in Christ's trial, which I will get to later, but underneath the many illegalities ran a strong undercurrent for legality in a sense of formal adherence to certain points of law.

The Sanhedrin and the high priests wanted to make sure everything was done, at least seemingly, by the law.

Now one of these was the call of witnesses. Mark says that many testified falsely against Him, meaning their statements did not agree. Matthew declares the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put Him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.

Apparently there was a search for true testimony that might have condemned Jesus, but the priests could not procure it. Clearly valuable time was wasted in these fruitless accusations.

Now there were three categories of testimony according to the Mishnah: 1) A vain testimony, 2) A standing testimony, and 3) Adequate testimony. They really had this nailed down in detail.

The first of these, the vain testimony, referred to accusations that were obviously irrelevant or worthless and therefore eliminated at once. This would be the kind of testimony that in our courts is stricken from the record and the jury is instructed to disregard.

The second one, a standing testimony, is a testimony of substance and relevance. It is permitted to stand until confirmed or disproved.

The third one, an adequate testimony, refers to evidence in which the witnesses agree together. This alone is adequate to convict.

So according to this division, it is clear that the first accusations—the accusations of many false witnesses—were vain testimony, and therefore were not even admitted provisionally. But if the last two men came forward with a very explicit piece of evidence, this could immediately put the trial on a newer and promising footing for the chief priests and the Sanhedrin.

Matthew says that two accused Him of saying, “I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.” We find this in Matthew 26:60-61. Now Mark says they gave this false testimony, “We heard Him say that I will destroy this manmade temple and in three days will build another not by man.” That is in Matthew 14:57-58.

This accusation was obviously of great importance. In the first place, it was seemingly true; at least there was an element of truth in it. The fact that there were two witnesses who testified to substantially the same thing is one indication of its pseudo-truthfulness.

But in addition to this, in one of those unintentional and therefore particular striking corroborations, John actually gives the incident in which these words were spoken. He says, “On the occasion of the first cleansing of the temple, Jesus, when asked for a sign, replied, ‘Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days,’” to which John remarks, “but the temple He had spoken of was His body.” We find this in John 2:19-21.

So we notice that although John does not refer to this incident in his own account of the trial, as we might expect him to, he nevertheless gives us a piece of narration that fits the situation in the other gospels perfectly.

The second reason why this particular accusation was important in the eyes of the priests is that it was also of a serious nature. It was the kind of accusation which, if substantiated, resulted in the penalty of death. So they—the Sanhedrin and the chief priests—were salivating at this very idea.

Well, it might be construed as sorcery, because no one could tear the Temple down and then rebuild it in three days without supernatural help. Again, it could also be construed as sacrilege, because the Temple was the holiest place in Israel, and the penalty for both of these crimes was death. So they thought they had Him on two counts.

Even so, it is hard to imagine that the high priests were not familiar with Jesus' prophesy that His resurrection would occur three days after His death. They understood precisely what He was claiming even though they may not have had it in a sufficiently clear way to condemn Him legally.

So the essence of the accusation of the two witnesses was that Jesus had claimed to be God and was able to prove this by His own resurrection. Now it was a damaging accusation, a fatal one, and yet here is a striking fact: this testimony was legally overthrown.

Besides all this, Caiaphas really did appear to have a case. Jesus had claimed to be God's Son in a unique way, thus making Himself liable to the penalty of death for blasphemy. Jesus was seemingly guilty when judged on the deposition of the Jewish court. Yet this was the real frustration. Caiaphas could not procure a legal condemnation. He was close, he was politically right, but the situation was slipping from his grasp.

At this point, Caiaphas revealed that shrewdness of character and determination for which the Romans had undoubtedly made him the chief Jewish ruler. What he did was in reality illegal, but it was a stroke of genius, politically.

Seeing that the case was dissolved before his (Caiaphas') eyes, he abruptly turned to interrogate the prisoner Himself, demanding of Him, on the basis of the most solid form of oath known to Israel, the famous oath of a testimony.

Matthew 26:63 But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, “I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!”

It was a brilliant stroke for several reasons. For one thing, the oath was clever. Although Jesus was not compelled to give evidence against Himself, being a sincere Jew, He would not refuse such a solemn challenge.

Matthew 26:64-65 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.” Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, “He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy!”

The substance of the charge was also clever. If Caiaphas had merely asked Jesus if He was the Christ or the Messiah, He could have answered yes without jeopardy, because it was not a capital offense to make such a claim. Time would prove that the claim was either true or false. Or, again if Caiaphas had merely asked Jesus if He was the Son of God, Jesus could have also have answered yes without danger, because as He indicated on another occasion that all Jews had a right to be called sons of God.

John 10:33-36 The Jews answered Him, saying, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God.” Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, “You are gods”?’ If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?”

However, by combining the two, Caiaphas interpreted the one term by the other and thereby asking, in effect, not whether Jesus was a mere human messiah or a son of God in the general Jewish sense, but whether He was a divine Messiah. And when Jesus knowingly answered yes to that accusation, He was immediately convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death.

Jesus still had total control, and He still was able to make a decision whether to answer yes or not, but it was all according to God's plan and He knew it. The Jewish trial exposes the true nature of the hearts of men and women. We tend to look at our own nature as being essentially good—that is what human nature tells us—but this is not the way God views it, them, or us. A trial like this brings out human nature to the *n*th degree.

Jeremiah says of men, “The heart deceitful above all things” and this does not mean according to biblical teaching that we are all as evil as we could possibly be. Given enough time and opportunity, we could all be much worse than we are, but it does not mean the roots of even the most heinous crimes, even perpetuated in the history of the world, are within our human nature. Being placed in a situation that is similar to others, who did these things, we have nothing within to hinder us from doing likewise unless we have God's Holy Spirit, His very mind and nature dwelling in us. Even still we are battling with our own human nature.

The trial of Jesus also reminds us of His claims and promises. True, Jesus was condemned illegally, and we will look at some of the illegalities in more detail in my next sermon, but still, the issues themselves were the right issues and the claims with which He was convicted were the real claims. He had made three of them:

- 1) He claimed to be God,
- 2) He claimed that He would rise from the dead after three days,
- 3) He claimed that He would return again in judgment.

All these claims were true. The resurrection was true. Since it was true, it was obvious that He was who He claimed to be, because God would not have indicated His claim to be the unique Son of God if this was blasphemy.

Truly, the final judgment is proved by the resurrection, as Paul said to the Greeks in Athens in Acts 17:31.

Acts 17:31 because He [that is God] has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man [Jesus] whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

So the question is not whether the claims of Jesus Christ are true, but rather how we ourselves respond to them, and therefore also whether we will be accounted worthy of Him when He does come.

Next time I will cover the illegalities of Christ’s trial, messianic prophecies related to the trial, and what we can learn from Peter as the cock crows.