

**Luke 22:63-71**  
**Jesus Before the Sanhedrin**

In 1780, founding father John Adams was writing a new state constitution for Massachusetts. Having won independence from Britain, each of the colonies, now states, needed to rewrite their fundamental laws to reflect the fact that the United States was an independent country. As they did, they also needed to define what kind of government that would be. John Adams offered his voice when he wrote that Massachusetts was to have “a government of laws and not of men.”

This concept, so familiar to us today, has evolved throughout history. Most governments, beginning with the ancient empires of Mesopotamia, China, Egypt, and the Americas, were governments of men who ruled without any written or codified system of law. As time passed, laws were written down, for example Hammurabi’s ancient code for Babylon. Eventually most civilizations had some form of written law, but they still remained a government of men, since the king, himself, was not subject to the law itself.

The ancient Jews were an exception to this rule. They took great pride, almost too much so, in their body of laws. The nuances of their laws, originally given by God, had been worked out with excruciating detail throughout the centuries. Their law applied to every conceivable aspect of life. When some new development occurred, the law was adapted to meet the need. And a key element of Jewish law was it was appropriately exercised by the judges.

“<sup>18</sup>You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.

<sup>19</sup>You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. <sup>20</sup>Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 16:18-20).

The Jewish judicial system had developed thoroughly by the time of Jesus. Any town with a minimum of one hundred twenty men who were the head of a family was entitled to establish a local court called a Sanhedrin. This court was composed of twenty-three men, or a smaller number if the size of the village made it necessary. This court possessed authority in both civil and religious matters and maintained order among most Jews. If circumstances warranted, the wisdom of the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem could be consulted. This group functioned as something of a final court of appeal. It was made up of seventy men who were either the current and former chief priests (usually Sadducees), scribes (usually Pharisees), and elders (powerful family leaders).

Regardless of whether the trial was taking place in a small village in Galilee or in Jerusalem itself, the same laws applied. Three characteristics of Jewish law apply to the passage we are looking at today. First, any trial was to be public. Second, the defendant permitted to call witnesses. Finally, a verdict of guilty was permitted only upon the testimony of two or three witnesses. Since the only evidence that bore weight in Jewish law was the testimony of witnesses, this was especially emphasized.

“On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness” (Deuteronomy 17:6).

“<sup>16</sup>If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, <sup>17</sup>then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days. <sup>18</sup>The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, <sup>19</sup>then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you” (Deuteronomy 19:16-19).

A trial would take place in the following manner. On the day of the trial, the accused would appear and the witnesses would be called. Each witness would be warned as to the importance of testifying to the truth. A woman, slave, child, person of disreputable character, or one who was ceremonially unclean could not be called as a witness. Interestingly, a person could not confess to a crime and be found guilty upon that confession alone. Other witnesses would be required to validate the confession. After the witnesses had given their testimony, the accused was permitted to speak in his own defense. After all testimony had been given, the spectators were removed and the members of the Sanhedrin voted. A simple majority was all that was required to acquit the accused. If such a vote occurred, the accused was immediately released. If, instead, the vote was to convict, the Sanhedrin adjourned until the third day, during which time the council members were required to abstain from drink and anything else which might distract them from reflecting on the case at hand.

On the third day, if the Sanhedrin had not reconsidered in the favor of the accused, the court sentenced him to death. This was carried out quickly, with the procession proceeding slowly to the place of execution. Along the way, heralds announced the impending doom and called for any witnesses in favor of the accused to come forward quickly, as the verdict might still be overturned. If the accused recalled something in his own defense, he could return to the Sanhedrin and give evidence. This could happen up to five times. Finally, if no further evidence was given, the accused was given a drink to null the pain of execution, and the sentence was carried out.

Despite the many rules and regulations governing criminal trials in Jewish law, the proceedings against Jesus were extraordinarily irregular. That is, even according to their own regulations, the trial against Jesus was not done properly. For example,

The trial took place at the home of the high priest rather than in the temple (Mishnah Sanhedrin 11.2).

Jesus was not allowed to call witnesses in his defense (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4.1).

Jesus was accused of blasphemy, even though this could only be charged if the accused actually pronounced the name YHWH (Mishnah Sanhedrin 7.5).

The verdict was given in the space of one day, when at least two days are required (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4.1).

The contradictory evidence should have been ignored (Mishnah Sanhedrin 5.2).

The order of pronouncing the verdict was incorrect. It should have begun with the youngest member of the council and proceeded to the high priest. In Jesus' case, the high priest was the first to pronounce the verdict (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4.2).

## **The Trial**

As we return to the narrative in Luke, while Peter was struggling to maintain his composure in the courtyard of the high priest, Jesus was being tried in the adjacent rooms. Luke does not recount the details of this preliminary trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin (focusing instead on the actions of Peter), but we can fill in the gaps using the other gospel narratives.

After being arrested, Jesus was taken to the home of the high priest, Caiaphas, where He was confronted by Annas. Annas had served as high priest from 6-15 AD. He was still powerful, since five of his sons and one grandson had succeeded him as high priest and, having exhausted his own family line, his son-in-law Caiaphas now served as high priest. This questioning in itself was a violation of Jewish law, since Annas had no real authority to become involved.

A turning point in their conversation came when Jesus said <sup>20</sup>“I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. <sup>21</sup>Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; they know what I said” (John 18:20-21). This led to two consequences. First, the soldiers guarding Jesus began to hit Him, thus violating a basic rule of Jewish jurisprudence. Second, Annas used Jesus’ words as an excuse to bring in whatever witnesses that could be found to testify against Jesus.

Jesus was then brought before Caiaphas and members of the Sanhedrin. There is no reason to presume that all seventy men had been roused from their beds to hear the testimony. After all, they all knew that these proceedings were invalid. The Sanhedrin was not permitted to meet at night, in a private residence, or on a feast day. Since all three provisions were being simultaneously violated, the Sanhedrin would need to reconvene during daylight hours to officially pass a verdict.

During this meeting, “the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death” (Matthew 26:59). Notice that they did not merely adjudicate the issue brought before them, as they ought to have done under their own laws. They went in search of evidence. They sought out witnesses who might testify against the accused. The judges had become the prosecuting attorneys. Despite their best efforts, however, they had difficulty discovering (or coercing) those who could give solid testimony against Jesus, “for many were giving false testimony against Him, but their testimony was not consistent” (Mark 14:56). Finally, <sup>57</sup>“some stood up and began to give false testimony against Him, saying, <sup>58</sup>“we heard Him say, “I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands”” (Mark 14:57-58). But “not even in this respect was their testimony consistent” (Mark 14:59).

The contradictory nature of the evidence should have led to its immediate dismissal. Furthermore, according to Jewish law, a person could not be convicted of a capital crime (other than blasphemy) for merely something they said. Finally, the Sanhedrin refused to allow Jesus to call witnesses on His own behalf, since they did not positively respond to Jesus’ request that the Sanhedrin call in those who had heard Him speak (John 18:20-21).

As the hours passed and the intensity of the night increased, the leaders of the Sanhedrin tried another tactic. Frustrated, “the high priest said to Him, ‘I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God’” (Matthew 26:63). Jesus answered, “you have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 26:64).

This was hardly a revelation. Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah since the beginning of His ministry.

<sup>16</sup>And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. <sup>17</sup>And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

<sup>18</sup>The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,  
Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.  
He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set free those who are oppressed,

<sup>19</sup>To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.”

<sup>20</sup>And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. <sup>21</sup>And He began to say to them, ‘today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:16-21).

But it was sufficient. The Sanhedrin was now prepared to give a verdict. There was no vote; the high priest simply <sup>65</sup>tore his robes and said, ‘He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; <sup>66</sup>what do you think?’ They answered, ‘He deserves death!’” (Matthew 26:65-66).

### **The Consequence**

All of this happened while Peter was struggling to find his courage in the courtyard. Returning to Luke’s account, he noted that upon hearing the verdict of the high priest, “the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking Him and beating Him” (v. 63). They considered the issue settled. Though they had no authority to commit a man to death, members of the Sanhedrin, the temple guards, and perhaps even some Roman soldiers began to execute the sentence. Matthew gave more details writing that “they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him” (Matthew 26:67). As if the physical abuse was not enough, “they blindfolded Him and were asking Him, saying, ‘prophecy, who is the one who hit You?’” (v. 64). Completely ignoring Whom they were addressing, “they were saying many other things against Him, blaspheming” (v. 65).

It is remarkable to read of such behavior by men of God. Whether it was actually them, or their hired underlings, that the religious leaders would reduce themselves to such petty violence as to beat a blindfolded man who could not defend Himself is disturbing. It serves as a reminder of the cruelty to which people can be reduced if they do not act in accordance with the Spirit of God. We must remember that “the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God” (Romans 8:7). We cannot imagine the hell our world would be, if Holy Spirit did not restrain sin.

The religious leaders then had Jesus led away to await the sunrise from a nearby cell. It was at this moment that, in the courtyard Peter uttered his third denial, the rooster crowed, and Jesus and he made eye contact. As Peter left the chief priest's house a broken and contrite man, Jesus waited in His cell. "When it was day, the Council of elders of the people assembled, both chief priests and scribes, and they led Him away to their council chamber" (v. 66). This was to be the 'official' trial before the Sanhedrin. The Jewish leaders, despite their open flaunting of their own system, still tried to maintain the formalities of protocol. Such was their slavery to the Law.

One can only wonder at the extent to which they maintained their charade of decency and fairness. Once they had all gathered, as if to make a show of beginning again impartially, they asked Jesus "if You are the Christ, tell us" (v. 67). Unwilling to participate in their farce, "67He said to them, 'if I tell you, you will not believe; 68and if I ask a question, you will not answer'" (v. 67-68). There was no need for further testimony by Jesus. He had taught them enough. There was no need for further miracles to attest to His true divine nature. There had been miracles enough. This was not a matter of misunderstanding or ignorance. They all could recall a scene that had been played out within the past few days.

"1On one of the days while He was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders confronted Him, 2and they spoke, saying to Him, 'tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?' 3Jesus answered and said to them, 'I will also ask you a question, and you tell Me: 4was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?' 5They reasoned among themselves, saying, 'if we say, "from heaven," He will say, "why did you not believe him?" 6But if we say, "from men," all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.' 7So they answered that they did not know where it came from. 8And Jesus said to them, 'nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things'" (Luke 20:1-8).

Also, Jesus wanted those who had gathered to understand that He knew that the Sanhedrin was not interested in matters of law and truth. But we cannot mistake Jesus' response for evasiveness or fear. He was not afraid or ashamed to declare that He was the Messiah, for He continued "but from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (v. 69). This was clearly understood as a reference to an Old Testament prophecy regarding the Messiah,

"13I kept looking in the night visions,  
And behold, with the clouds of heaven  
One like a Son of Man was coming,  
And He came up to the Ancient of Days  
And was presented before Him.  
14And to Him was given dominion,  
Glory and a kingdom,  
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language  
Might serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
Which will not pass away;  
And His kingdom is one  
Which will not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13-14).

The members of the Sanhedrin recognized this as the promise made by God the Father to God the Son recorded by David,

“The Lord says to my Lord:

‘Sit at My right hand

Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet” (Psalm 110:1).

Jesus was looking into eternity. He saw His death, of course, but He also saw His resurrection. He saw His ascension. He saw Pentecost and the birth of His church. He saw His return, His judgment, and His kingdom established forever.

But the Sanhedrin was still not satisfied. Wanting to make certain they had on record what Jesus claimed “they all said, ‘are You the Son of God, then?’ And He said to them, ‘yes, I am” (v. 70). He gave an unqualified answer. It is impossible for modern day sceptics to argue that Jesus never claimed to be God. He did so many times, and without excuse. His enemies understood His claims. This statement was enough. Repeating their performance from a few hours earlier, “they said, ‘what further need do we have of testimony? For we have heard it ourselves from His own mouth” (v. 71). The Sanhedrin had done its work, but now they needed the approval of the Roman governor.

### **Takeaways**

First, the scene of Jesus before the Sanhedrin is the beginning of one of the most poignant and irrefutable lessons in patience and suffering. That the Son of God would allow Himself to be thus treated is beyond our ability to appreciate. We can only take it as a model for the incomparably insignificant inconveniences we are asked to bear. How can we complain when we feel mistreated or misunderstood?

Related to this is the second point. We must not miss the boldness of Jesus’ confession. We suffer far less for doing the same, yet our reluctance far too often presents itself. Let us remember,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

“<sup>32</sup>Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. <sup>33</sup>But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10:32-33)