

“LIKE A LAMB LED TO SLAUGHTER...”
MATTHEW 26:57-68

We are nearing the end of our exposition of Matthew’s Gospel, and we are currently studying the section that is commonly called, “The Passion Story,” the story of Jesus’ suffering and death, which took place on Thursday night and Friday morning of Holy Week. Last time, when we looked at the passage recounting Jesus’ arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus declared to a panicking Peter that these seemingly tragic events that were now unfolding were a fulfillment of Scripture.

When Jesus said this, He most certainly had Isaiah 53 in mind. Indeed, seven hundred and forty years before Jesus was born, the prophet predicted almost every one of the things that happened to Jesus that Thursday night and Friday morning. And the thing we will be looking at today is found in **verse 7**, *⁷ He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.*

We are going to see how Jesus fulfilled this prophecy, why He fulfilled it, and what it reveals about Him and His Father. Look at **Matthew 26:57-58**. *⁵⁷ Then those who had seized Jesus led Him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. ⁵⁸ And Peter was following Him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside He sat with the guards to see the end.*

Before we dive into the text, let me provide a context for what is going on here. Israel was part of the Roman Empire, but when Rome conquered and subjugated a territory, they normally allowed much of the local administration to continue operating, including judicial institutions. So, in Israel, the Jewish leaders were permitted to administer justice to their citizens according to their own laws with one exception: they were not allowed to impose the death penalty. Capital crimes were solely under the jurisdiction of Rome (Morris, PNTC).

In the case of Jesus, the situation was complicated by the fact that the Jewish leaders saw Him as guilty of a religious crime. He claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God, which they interpreted as blasphemy and, according to the law of Moses, was punishable by death. The Romans, however, would not recognize this as a crime, much less a capital crime. They could be only persuaded to execute Jesus if there was evidence that He had committed what they recognized as a major offense—like setting Himself up as a king in opposition to Caesar.

In what follows Matthew shows us how the Jewish authorities came to condemn Jesus according to their own law, but then brought a charge before the Roman governor that was not their real grievance, but that would induce Pilate to crucify Him (Morris). Thus, the trial of Jesus took place in two main stages: the first before the Jews and the second before the Roman governor. We are looking at the first trial today.

Matthew tells us that the mob that had seized Jesus in the Garden led Him to Caiaphas, the high priest. Caiaphas’ house was a palatial mansion in the heart of Jerusalem near the Temple, and it was in the courtyard of this residence that the scribes and elders had gathered. This particular group of scribes and elders, according to verse 59, comprised “the council,” a reference to the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin, consisting of 23 esteemed scholars and teachers. These men were thought to be the best and brightest legal experts and theologians in Judaism, and Matthew tells us that the *whole* council was present, even though only seven were needed for a quorum. This, along with the fact that this trial took place in the middle of the night on a holiday, indicates just how desperate they were to deal with this situation and be rid of Jesus.

Don't forget, Jesus' disciples had abandoned Him in the Garden as He was being apprehended, but Peter followed the mob to Caiaphas' house from a safe distance, and during these proceedings was mingling with the guards in the courtyard, pretending to be anonymous.

Look at **verses 59-60a**. ⁵⁹ *Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put Him to death,* ⁶⁰ *but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward.*

Matthew declares that the council had convened at this strange hour for one purpose—to find a legal basis for condemning Jesus to death. But in so doing, they broke many of their own rules for administering justice. Jewish law specified that capital cases could only be tried during daylight hours, and a verdict could only be reached during daylight hours. What is more, while a verdict of acquittal may be reached on the same day, a guilty verdict could not be reached until the following day. Furthermore, capital trials could not be conducted on the eve of a Sabbath or a Festival, and this was the evening of Passover.

As I said earlier, Caiaphas and the council were desperate, but they kept up the appearance of legality by looking for at least two witnesses who could independently agree on their damning testimony. It is clear that they had already made up their minds that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death, but they needed witnesses to corroborate their verdict. Matthew says that they could not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Mark tells us that many bore false witness against Him, but none of their testimonies agreed (14:56). In the absence of agreement by two or more witnesses, the case against Jesus could not move forward, and the high priest would have no choice but to release Him.

Verses 60b-61. *At last two came forward* ⁶¹ *and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'"*

Early in John's Gospel, after Jesus had cleansed the temple, the Jews asked Jesus for a "sign" that would justify his audacious actions (John 2:18). He replied, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (v.19). In that passage, John explained for his readers that Jesus was not referring to the Jerusalem Temple, but "the temple of His body" (v. 21). But that was John's editorial comment. Jesus did not say this audibly at the time, so His remark about the temple could easily be misinterpreted, especially if you were suspicious of Jesus. Apparently, these false witnesses heard Jesus say this and interpreted it literally, and to them it sounded sinister. Of course, the Sanhedrin had no interest in probing what Jesus actually meant by those words. It was enough for them that there were two witnesses who could testify that Jesus had spoken words that might be understood as blasphemous.

Verse 62. ⁶² *And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?"*

The high priest was hoping that Jesus would hear these accusations and respond in such a way that would be incriminating. But Jesus did not respond at all, which frustrated the high priest. So, he stood up and pressed Jesus on the matter.

Clearly Caiaphas felt that after hearing the two witnesses he was finally getting somewhere in his attempt to condemn Jesus, but as of yet he did not have sufficient grounds for the death penalty. That Jesus threatened to destroy the temple might have been offensive, but it was not enough to condemn Him to death. So, he tried to goad Jesus into saying something that would make matters worse for Him. Instead, **Verse 63.** ⁶³ *...Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."*

Normally, an accused person would vehemently try to prove His innocence. But Jesus was different. Just as He did not defend Himself physically in the Garden (though He could have called twelve legions of angels to rescue Him), He was not going to defend Himself legally in a courtroom. He knew, just like Isaiah had predicted, that He was being led like a lamb to the slaughter, and that it was His Father's will that He be obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, He remained silent.

Now even more frustrated, Caiaphas charged Him under oath to answer his question, Is He Messiah or not (v. 63b)? Caiaphas also uses the title "Son of God." He wanted Jesus to state under oath whether or not He was the Messiah, and the sense in which He is using "Messiah" concerns the Messiah's relationship to God (Morris). The testimony of the witnesses was not enough to condemn Jesus to death, so he tried to get Jesus to incriminate Himself.

Verse 64. *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."*

To answer Caiaphas' question either "yes" or "no" could have been misleading, so Jesus answers somewhat ambiguously. He says in effect, "That is your word, not mine," or "That is your way of putting it."

Jesus was aware that for Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the concept of Messiah had nationalistic, anti-Roman associations (Blomberg), but that was not Jesus' concept of Messiah or Son of God. So, Jesus qualifies His affirmation by quoting Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1. "He is the Christ, the Son of God, when those titles are rightly interpreted. But correct interpretation must allow for Him also to be the heavenly Son of Man who occupied the most honored position in the universe, next to the very throne of God. This Son of Man will one day come to judge the people of the earth, including those who now judge Him" (Blomberg).

The high priest and the Sanhedrin were intimately acquainted with these passages regarding "Son of Man" in Daniel, and "the Lord sitting at the right hand of the Lord" in Psalm 110. They were clearly references about a heavenly being who was divine. And so, while it was not blasphemy merely to claim to be the Messiah, what Jesus had now said went far beyond that. **Verse 65.** *65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard His blasphemy."*

There is a law in Leviticus that prohibits a priest from tearing his clothes (Lev. 21:10). Tearing one's clothes, for a high priest, was an action reserved for extreme cases—like blasphemy. Caiaphas believed, rightly so, that Jesus had just equated Himself with God. So, he tore his robes, an act that signified revulsion at what he had just heard and vigorous repudiation of Jesus and His words.

Afterward, Caiaphas shouted, "*He has blasphemed!*" Actually, according to Jewish law, this was incorrect. Blasphemy could legally only be prosecuted if one used or abused of the sacred name of God, the name we transliterate as Yahweh. The Mishnah states, "'The blasphemer' is not culpable unless he pronounces the Name itself" (*Sanh.* 7:5). Jesus had not used that name; thus, according to the Jewish law, what He had said might have been offensive, but it was legally not blasphemy.

However, the high priest was willing to overlook that technicality because he believed that Jesus had just identified Himself with God, which, in his mind, was sufficient for him to pronounce a verdict. Caiaphas urged the council to view Jesus' words as blasphemy, and they complied.

Verse 66. *66 What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death."* Once blasphemy was established there was no question about the sentence: "He who blasphemes

the name of the LORD shall be put to death" (Lev. 24:16). The law was quite clear, and the Sanhedrin had no hesitation (Morris).

Verses 67-68. ⁶⁷ *Then they spit in His face and struck Him. And some slapped Him,* ⁶⁸ *saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"*

Their disgust led them to spit in Jesus' face, a serious insult that was meant to humiliate Him. They also assaulted Him by punching and slapping Him in the face. In Jewish culture, as in many cultures still today, a backhanded slap was a tremendous insult, more serious than any other kind of blow since it was intended to shame a person. The book of Exodus tells us that if someone got hit with a backhanded slap, they were entitled to double the compensation.

Finally, the council mocked His reputation as a prophet. Mark tells us that "they blindfolded Him" (14:65) before hitting Him and asking Him to identify who did it, which explains their charade a little better. It is easy to imagine their voices dripping with sarcasm as they taunted, "Christ!" (Blomberg).

My brothers and sisters, this is an innocent man who did not have an ounce of deceit or pride or malice in His heart, and who spent His entire life helping and healing others. This is also the eternal Son of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, Creator of the universe, experiencing and enduring this hostility and humiliation, utterly alone. What does it tell us about Him, and what does it tell us about His Father? Let me suggest three things:

First, *After Jesus' agonizing battle in the Garden in which He ultimately submitted to His Father's will, nothing could deter Him from going all the way to the cross.* Several months earlier, Jesus had told His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed... (Matt. 16:21). And when Peter rebuked Him for saying such a thing, Jesus said to Peter, *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."*

But in the Garden of Gethsemane just a few hours earlier, Jesus had prayed not once but twice, *"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will"* (Matt. 26:39). That was His humanity being revealed in full measure. Knowing the kind of suffering and death that He was about to experience, He was understandably anxious and afraid. But ultimately, Jesus submitted to His Father's will. For He knew that His primary purpose for coming into this world was to be a sin offering—to bear the sins of the world in His own body and to be punished instead of us, so that we could be forgiven and have eternal life. He knew that He came to die, and once He submitted, He was calm and resolute even in the face of injustice and humiliation, because He was determined to do His Father's will.

Second, *Jesus remained silent, even though He could have exposed and condemned His accusers' malice, deceit, and hypocrisy.* Jesus had said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, *"Do not resist the one who is evil, but if someone slaps you on the right cheek turn to him the other also"* (Matt. 5:39).

That was not just preacher talk. Jesus practiced what He preached. He did not open His mouth when all this happened to Him. He did not resist or fight back. He let it happen. Peter, who was in the courtyard watching all this happen to Jesus, writes in his first letter, ²³ *When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly"* (1 Peter 2:23).

Finally, *Jesus' Father (and ours) demonstrated His profound love for mankind by refraining from stopping the abuse and crushing the bullies who brutalized His son.*

Have you ever witnessed one of your children being bullied? How did you feel? What did you do? The one thing that is more difficult than not retaliating when you yourself are suffering unjustly, is watching your kids suffer unjustly. I'm not sure I could stand by and let it happen without pouncing on their attackers.

I want you to remember that Jesus' heavenly Father was present at this trial. He could have called down fire to incinerate Jesus' accusers and attackers. He could have stricken them with blindness or deafness. He could have turned them into stone statues. But He didn't. Instead, He watched it all happen. He watched them falsely accuse His Son. He watched them spit on Him, slap Him, punch Him, mock Him, and treat Him like trash.

Why didn't He? Why didn't He intervene and protect His Son like any good father would?

Because, in the words of John, *"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..."* (John 3:16). Because *"This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins"* (1 John 4:9-10).

God watched His Son be brutalized and then die a horrible death on a cross because offering His own sinless Son as a sin-offering for sinners, was the only way we could be forgiven of our sins and be reconciled to Him. He did it because He loves us.

“Like a Lamb Led to Slaughter...”

Matthew 26:57-68

Main Idea: *During His trial before the Jewish leaders, Jesus remains resolute even while being falsely accused and horribly humiliated.*

Jesus is brought to the ruling council of Judaism (57-58)

He is delivered by those who seized Him in the Garden

Peter follows at a distance

The ruling council hastily convenes a trial for Jesus (59-61)

They do not follow their own rules

He is presumed guilty of a capital crime (59)

They seek false and damning testimony (59-60a)

Two witnesses come forward (60b-61)

They “heard” Jesus predict He would destroy the temple

They “heard” Jesus predict He would rebuild the temple in three days

The interchange between Jesus and the high priest (62-64)

The high priest implores Jesus to defend Himself (62)

Jesus remains silent (63a)

The high priest demands to know if Jesus claims to be Messiah, Son of God (63b)

Jesus responds to the high priest (64)

He affirms that he got it right

He declares that he will see Him in His glorified state

The furious high priest accuses Jesus of blasphemy, punishable by death (65-66)

The enraged crowd mocks and abuses Jesus (67-68)

Learning from Jesus and the Father

- After Jesus’ agonizing battle in the Garden in which He ultimately submitted to His Father’s will, nothing could deter Him from going all the way to the cross.
- Jesus remained silent, even though He could have exposed His accusers’ deceit, malice, and hypocrisy.
- The Father demonstrated His profound love for mankind by refraining from stopping and then crushing the bullies who mocked, abused, and scorned His Son.