

***“24 Hours that Changed the World—When the Righteous Condemn”***

Today we’re continuing in the series we started last week called “24 Hours that Change the World.” We’re looking at the last 24 hours of Jesus’ life with the understanding that he knew what time he had left and so everything he did, and said he chose very carefully, very intentionally. That last 24 hours was the stuff he wanted the world to really truly see, and hear, and understand.

Last week we looked at the last supper. Jesus used that meal to give us a new way to define our lives. We were once slaves of sin and death, but now, because of Jesus’ broken body and the blood he shed, we’re free, we are the people of God. At that last meal Jesus predicted that Judas would betray him, that Peter would deny him and that all the disciples would desert him. But he still served them, washed their feet. He called them his friends.

That brings us to today. Because after that meal, Jesus and the disciples, minus Judas, went to the Garden of Gethsemane—a place for Jesus and his friends to pray. While he’s praying Judas leads a mob of soldiers to capture Jesus. These were not Roman soldiers but Temple guards. Jewish soldiers.

We’re told that Judas identifies Jesus with a kiss and they grab him up. There’s a scuffle and Peter takes out a sword and cuts the ear off of one of the men there. Jesus stops the fight, heals the man and surrenders. They tie Jesus up to take him back into the city and all the rest of the disciples disappear into the night. Except Peter who stays close enough to follow but not close enough to be seen.

Two stories unfold from that point on. They take Jesus to the home of Caiaphas the High Priest where the Sanhedrin had gathered for a late-night trial—Jesus’ trial. The Romans occupied that part of the world and they dealt with political affairs, but the Sanhedrin dealt with religious affairs. When cases were about Jewish law they were sent to the Sanhedrin for a decision.

The Sanhedrin was made up of seventy-one of the leading religious leaders and minds of Judea. They were some of the most devout, truth-seeking, rigorously religious men in the world. They were known to be brilliant, God-loving men who were members of the middle class. The members of the Sanhedrin were expected to be ruthlessly honest. They had control of the Temple, of the religious courts, of the Temple guards. They were supposed to meet publicly in the Temple; they were supposed to only meet during the day, in public view and they were not supposed to meet during any of the holy festivals. But this night, Jesus is captured and brought to them in the middle of the night. They broke their own rules in order to put this trouble-maker, Jesus, on trial. False witnesses are brought in, witnesses who can’t even get their stories straight. But convict Jesus of blasphemy.

This is where we’ve got to take a step back and realize what’s going on. Christians believe that in Jesus, God became one of us; that God took on human flesh and blood and walked the earth. The God of the universe in human form—a carpenter, a teacher, a healer. The people who arrest Jesus and put him on trial are some of the most religious and pious people on the planet. See the irony here! The God they claim to serve above everything else in life had come to walk among them and they could not see him. And not only did they not see him, but they broke their own code of absolute truth in order to get rid of him!

These most religious people don’t recognize that they are face to face with God and they put God on trial. And get this, they end up convicting Jesus, God in human form, they convict the Lord of blasphemy against himself! A crime worthy of death. Amazing, tragic irony. These pious men condemn him to death and then they spit on him, then they blind fold him so they can mock him and hit him. Then they turn him over to the guards to beat him some more.

I’ve heard people say, “You know I’d believe in God if he’d just show up. If he would come and knock on my door, I’d believe in him.” Well, he did that once and this is what humanity did to him.

It’s easy to rip apart the Sanhedrin for what they did. But I’ve got to wonder if I, if you, would have done anything different if we were a part of the Sanhedrin. I think that there’s a dark part of all of us that would have gone along. That’s part of our human condition.

Why did good, godly, truth-seeking, pious men do this to Jesus? Even if they thought he was a false messiah, why would they spit on him, and blindfold him and humiliate him? Why? I think a big part of the answer is fear. Some of it is instinct. We’re wired with that fight-or-flight response. It’s an innate desire to be safe, to protect ourselves. And that’s a helpful thing when you’re in a dangerous situation—fight or flee.

The problem is that our self-preservation instinct get’s coupled with our sin instinct. We see it all the time. At work it gets lived out when somebody is doing better than us. We can feel threatened by that and our self-preservation instinct can cause us to undermine that person with gossip, or lack of support, or withholding information they might need. We start to diminish that other person because we feel threatened by their success.

I think a big part of the racism in our past as a nation was about this fear, about self-preservation coupled with fear. Jim Crow laws, segregation, the KKK were all about fear, about self-preservation. We can become so afraid, so wrapped up in seeking safety that we forget the heart of our faith.

We see images of what soldiers did in the Abu Grabe prison. Fear combined with our self-preservation instinct, combined with our sinful nature is a deadly combination.

Jesus was a threat to the Sanhedrin. He threatened their social order, their authority, their standing in the community. They were worried that Jesus would stir up a rebellion so big that the Roman army would come in and destroy everything. The High Priest, Caiaphas summed up the sentiment of the Sanhedrin. It would be better if this one man died, than many die because of him. Fear and self-preservation. Jesus must die.

Our human condition is that we are afraid of those who are different from us, we fear loss and change. And fear gives birth to hate. And many times because of our fear and hate we end up doing the wrong thing.

It's easy to pick on the Sanhedrin, but if I'm honest, when I look at the Sanhedrin, I can see myself. I can see myself out fear and self-preservation doing the wrong thing, but thinking it's the right thing. It scares me to think that you and I could have within us the ability to do what we now know is wrong. Fear coupled with sin, is a destroyer. I could very well have sat with the Sanhedrin and said, "Crucify him!" I could have been one that spat him.

But the scriptures say this, **"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear...We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (I John 4:16-20, NIV).**

The question we ask as Christians in our personal lives and regarding public policy is not what will make me feel most secure, but what is the most loving thing for me to do. And in the end love conquers in ways that fear and hate and violence simply cannot. That's what the scriptures teach us about the ways of God.

One last thing about the Sanhedrin. There are 71 men in on the trial. Surely somebody among those 71 was thinking, "this is not right, we're going too far, what we're doing here goes against everything we stand for, what if this Jesus is telling the truth?" Surely somebody in that group was thinking something like that. But as far as we can tell, nobody spoke up. They all agreed to his death. How did that happen? It happens when everybody in a group seems to be going in one direction and it's hard to speak up because you don't want to look strange, or rock the boat, or be ridiculed.

I was there as kid, vandalizing a building with some other boys. I knew it was wrong, it felt wrong, but I didn't say anything. I went along with the crowd and broke the windows and felt terrible, felt dirty, afterward, wishing I had the courage to speak up.

I have a feeling that in the Sanhedrin there were people later who said, "Why didn't I speak up? Why didn't I say anything?"

Martin Niemoller was a Luther pastor in Germany during Hitler's rise to power. In the beginning he didn't speak up against Hitler's atrocities, but then he couldn't be silenced. He is famous for saying this about the Nazis, "They came for the communists, but I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the socialists, but I didn't speak up because I wasn't a socialist. Then they came for the Jews, but I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the Catholics, but I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Catholic. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak up."

Edmund Burke put it this way, "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." Keeping silent, doing nothing, when you see a wrong being done, that is a sin.

What if in the corporate board room, when shady off-shore deals are being proposed, or ways of financing that simply can't last are brought up, or a practice that preys up the poor, or uneducated is laid out, what if in those boardrooms, someone went against the flow and said, "Wait a second, why don't we think this through, is this really what we want to do? This just doesn't sound right." How many messes could we have avoided, that we're wading through right now, if maybe somebody had said what they were thinking, "This just doesn't feel right." I'm guessing that if a few more people had done that we might very well be in a different place economically right now.

Now I'm not talking about you going around pointing out other people's sins. That's just plain obnoxious when Christians go around and point out everybody's sins. I'm saying that when you're a part of something, a group, a decision-making body, and something wrong is happening, part of what we have to do with humility and caution, is say, "I have a question about this, something just doesn't seem right."

Or when you see injustice being done to somebody else and you know it doesn't feel right and you're afraid if you should say something or not. Say something!

While the trial of Jesus is going on inside the palace of Caiaphas, there's another trial going on outside. You see, Peter has followed the crowd from the garden of Gethsemane. He's kept his distance, but he's there to see what's going to happen to Jesus and he gets caught. At the Last Supper Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him,

that all would abandon him. The Gospel of Mark says this: **“Peter declared, ‘Even if all fall away, I will not.’ ‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘today-- yes, tonight-- before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.’ But Peter insisted emphatically, ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you’” (Mark 14:29-31, NIV).**

Jesus gave Peter his name. He was called Simon but Jesus renames him Peter. Peter means the rock. Peter follows at a distance and arrives at the palace of Caiaphas right after Jesus. He’s warming himself by a fire in the courtyard when one of the servant girls notices Simon Peter warming himself by the fire. She looks at him and says, “You also were with that Nazarene.” Peter says, “I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about.” Peter’s claiming ignorance.

A while later the same servant girl sees Simon Peter standing by the entryway to the complex. She looks around at the other people in the courtyard, nods in Peter’s direction, and says “This man is one of them.” Again, Peter denies it. This time, though, he isn’t just claiming to be ignorant but he’s saying he’s not one of Jesus’ followers. Now he’s denying any connection to the Christian community. (See Lamar Williamson Jr.’s notes on this in his commentary on Mark in the *Interpretation* series.)

Some time goes by and now the people outside the high priest’s house are looking at Simon Peter with interest. With suspicion. It isn’t just one servant girl who thinks there is something different about this stranger with the Galilean accent, but the group of people clustered outside in the cool night air are looking hard at Peter. They say, “Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.”

Now Simon Peter loses it. Scripture says “he began to call down curses” (TNIV). Simon says, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.”

In the distance a rooster crows a second time. Peter remembers how Jesus said, “Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.” He remembers. And the face of this tough, strong-talking fisherman is suddenly wet with tears.

These are two stories of betrayal in the face of pressure. The Sanhedrin ended up turning their backs on the truth. They ended up going through the motions of justice--faking their way through a fair trial in an effort to protect their positions of power and influence.

They betrayed their own commitment to truth. They betrayed their own commitment to fairness. They betrayed their own commitment to justice. They betrayed their own willingness to be open to the new thing God might do. Fear and self-preservation.

Peter’s betrayal is less dramatic. He just sort of slips into the shadows. One minute he is standing by Jesus, side saying he will never fall away, never run away, never lose his faith or his courage. Then, he is slipping to the edge of the crowd, taking slower and smaller steps, until the Rock is at a distance from Jesus.

Then Peter stands there cursing, denying he has ever met Jesus of Nazareth. Fear can cause us to do sad things, weak things, hateful things...can’t it? When love for God may cost us something, when telling the truth is hard, it is an easy thing to slip into the shadows, step away, keep quiet. But there’s a part of this story we haven’t talked about yet, you know.

There is another plot line being woven through the lines of Mark 14, and it is a narrative of faithfulness. Jesus is betrayed. Jesus is falsely accused. Jesus is mocked and beaten. And Jesus is faithful to God, to the truth, to himself, to us. When he is asked if he is the Messiah Jesus simply says, “I am.” One dad tells about a time when his teenage son was so frustrated and angry and furious. The dad said to him, “I love you.” His son fired back, “I don’t want you to love me!” The dad said, “I don’t care whether or not you want me to love you because I will always love you anyway.”

In front of the Sanhedrin, the world seems to be telling God, “We don’t want your love.” Jesus stands there, beaten and humiliated, and says, “I am.” It’s a way of saying, “I choose to love you, whether you want that love or not.”

Everywhere you look in this story it seems like people are doing the easy thing, but Jesus chooses to do the hard thing, to be faithful, because he trusts God and he loves us. Maybe his courage, his faithfulness, his truth, can rub off on us.

Way too often I am like Peter, I slip into the shadows, I swallow the truth. I do the easy thing. But maybe something can happen to this timid heart of mine, as I study Jesus standing there, refusing to bend to fear and convenience and hate. His example of faithfulness might just seed my heart and soul with courage. and a commitment to see that justice is done? Because, you see, when we stand firm for God, for what is right, against the mob, the world is changed, things are different.

I read a story this past week about Phil Callaway’s son. (ChristianityToday.Com, December 18, 2006), Phil writes that his son, ever since he was knee-high to a Doberman, was fearless. Take him to the ocean and he’d jump in looking for sharks. “Take him to the mountains and he’d see how high he could climb. One day when he was five, I watched in

horror as he jumped off a roof, a garbage bag duct-taped to his back. We couldn't be more opposite, my son and I. The higher he climbs, the more he believes God is with him. Not me. I believe God put us on dry land and says, 'Lo, I am with you always.'"

For years Phil wondered what God was going to do with his son. "Would he call him to be a crash-test dummy? A professional bungee jumper? Or would he fulfill every North American parent's dream by settling down in a huge house with a nice wife and provide us with some grandchildren to spoil?"

Phil and his wife were surprised to receive this email one day: *Dear Dad and Mom, I just want you to know that I met a couple nice girls and we're planning on being married. In Utah. Not really. But I did meet Lucy. You'll like her a lot. It's surprising how quickly you can find a Justice of the Peace down here. Lucy owns a tattoo parlor, but seldom works. Her father won some money in the lottery, so she's set for life. I won't need to work anymore either. I've bought a Mercedes convertible and you'll be happy to know I put a chrome fish on the bumper.*

*If you haven't fainted yet, here's the truth. It may be more shocking. In the country of Uganda, the...Army is committing atrocities against children that are too awful for me to put in this letter. Over the years they've abducted 50,000 kids and turned the ones they haven't murdered into soldiers. I'd like to work with street children in Kampala. I'll be living with local missionaries. It will mean lots of [vaccination] needles and I'll need to raise a little money too.*

*Dad, you told me once that Jesus came to comfort us, not to make us comfortable. I guess I've been comforted enough; it's time to offer some to others.*

"Where do you think we went wrong?" I asked his mother. 'Couldn't he just have a beach ministry in Hawaii? Maybe we blew it taking him to other countries and showing him what the real world looks like. Don't you just hate it when your son practices what you've been preaching (as a Christian parent)?"

"It's what we've prayed for all these years,' she said with a grin, 'that he would live life on purpose.'"

That fall they hugged their firstborn son goodbye and he left on an adventure half a world away. "Aren't you worried about his safety?' people ask when they hear Steve has gone to Uganda. 'I have my moments. Check a list of the most dangerous spots on earth and Uganda is near the top. But is safety what we're here for? Isn't complacency the most dangerous place on earth? Isn't suburbia sucking the life out of our teenagers more than any foreign country ever could?"

"There are times I'd rather Steve was home making good money, putting it away for my nursing home bills. Yet I cannot hope for more than this: that my children will hear God's voice despite a noisy culture, and that they will obey.

"I've shed a few tears, for sure. But mostly I've been giving thanks. For a son who's a much improved version of his father. For email and cheap overseas phone rates. And I'm thankful there are no sharks in Uganda."

There's something about Jesus standing there calmly saying, "I am." You can't forget that. You can't get that out of your head and heart. Especially when you and I are tempted to swallow the truth, ignore suffering, and do the easy thing by slipping away into the shadows of convenience and safety.

God's got a few questions for us. "Do you know my Son and will you stand with him?" "Will you stand and do what is right, say what is right, fight for what is right, when the crowd is loud and the price you'll pay is great?"

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