

Good Friday

Jesus on Trial: The Witnesses

Mark 14:55-64

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Jesus on Trial: The Witnesses

Scripture

Three years I began what I planned to be a seven-year series of messages. It is based on the book by James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken that is titled, *Jesus on Trial*.¹ My goal is to teach on seven important aspects of the trial of Jesus Christ: the diabolical *conspiracy* to kill him (which I covered three years ago); his night-time *arrest* in the Garden of Gethsemane (which I covered two years ago); the short *resistance* that the disciples mounted in his defense (which I covered last year); the *witnesses* who accused him of blasphemy during his ecclesiastical trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin (which I plan to cover this evening); the *verdict* reached in his civil trial by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate; the *sentence* of death that his enemies demanded; and his *execution* by crucifixion.

Let us read Mark 14:55-64:

⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. ⁵⁶ For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷ And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, ⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’ ” ⁵⁹ Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰ And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” ⁶¹ But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” ⁶² And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” ⁶³ And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further wit-

¹ James Montgomery Boice & Philip Graham Ryken, *Jesus on Trial* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002).

nesses do we need? ⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death. ⁶⁵ (Mark 14:55-64)

Introduction

A *witness* is defined as follows: “In general, one who, being present, personally sees or perceives a thing; a beholder; a spectator, or eyewitness. One who testifies to what he has seen, heard, or otherwise observed.”²

Review

If you had been privy to what was going on behind the scenes regarding the trial of Jesus, you would have been aware that it all began with a conspiracy. The religious leaders and the political leaders had conspired together to get rid of Jesus. But they were having great difficulty doing so because of Jesus’ immense popularity with the people. However, a stunning development took place when one of Jesus’ own inner circle of friends stepped forward to betray him to the authorities. Judas Iscariot volunteered to betray Jesus for some unknown reason.

Then, on the evening of 14 Nissan, 30 AD Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. A large band of soldiers had managed to arrest Jesus without too much trouble.

The brief resistance from Jesus’ disciples did not amount to much. Jesus was quickly taken into custody, and a hasty trial was convened. Actually, there were several trials on the night of Jesus’ arrest. The religious leaders tried to find a way to accuse Jesus of some offense of which he would be guilty, for as Mark said, “Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death” (Mark 14:55).

² From Black’s *Law Dictionary*, quoted in James Montgomery Boice & Philip Graham Ryken, *Jesus on Trial* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002).

Lesson

Tonight, I would like to examine the account of the witnesses who accused Jesus of blasphemy during his ecclesiastical trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin.

I. The Accusations by the Witnesses (14:55-59)

First, notice the accusations by the witnesses.

In their book, *Jesus on Trial*, Boice and Ryken note that according to the compendium of Jewish law known as the *Mishnah*, there were three categories of testimony: 1) a vain testimony, 2) a standing testimony, and 3) an adequate testimony.

Vain testimony referred to accusations that were irrelevant or worthless and could therefore be eliminated at once. It corresponded to words that in our courts would be “stricken from the record,” or which the jury would be instructed to “disregard.”

Standing testimony was testimony that had some relevance to the case and was permitted to stand until it was either confirmed or disproved.

Adequate testimony was relevant testimony on which two or more witnesses agreed. Only testimony in this third category was sufficient to convict.³

Most of the testimony that was presented at that trial was vain testimony. Mark said in verse 56, **“For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.”**

I am sure it must have been very frustrating for the Jewish Sanhedrin. They were having a tough time finding two witnesses to agree on any testimony. Eventually, some promising witnesses stepped forward. Mark recorded their testimony, **“We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands’”** (14:58).

³ James Montgomery Boice & Philip Graham Ryken, *Jesus on Trial* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 60-61.

Now, this was significant. Jesus had made a statement to that effect, which the apostle John recorded in his Gospel. After Jesus cleansed the temple, the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:18-19). Jesus was of course speaking about the temple of his body (John 2:21), and it was a prophecy of his bodily resurrection from the dead.

On several occasions Jesus used the distinctive phrase, **“in three days.”** Jesus was prophesying his bodily resurrection from the dead in three days, an event that would validate his claim to be the unique Son of God.

Yet, astonishingly, even about this their testimony did not agree (14:59). We don’t know in what way it did not agree. But it did not, and so it could not be used as an adequate testimony.

II. The Accusation by the High Priest (14:60-61)

Second, look at the accusation by the high priest.

At this point, the high priest must have been beside himself. He could not get any two witnesses to agree on their testimony.

And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” But he remained silent and made no answer (14:60-61a). What the high priest did was completely improper. He was not to intervene in any way in a capital trial.

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” (14:61b). Now this was in fact a brilliant accusation by the high priest. Here’s why.

If the high priest had simply asked, **“Are you the Christ?”** Jesus could have answered “Yes” without jeopardy because it was not a capital offense to make such a claim. The **“Christ”** is the Greek term for “Messiah,” which means, “anointed one.” And there were many in the Old Testament who were anointed by God for particular service. That by itself was not blasphemous.

Or if the high priest had simply asked, **“Are you the Son of**

the Blessed?” which is the same as asking, “Are you the Son of God?” Jesus could also have answered “Yes” without jeopardy because all Jews were called “sons of God” (Psalm 82:6).

But, linking the two questions together was brilliant. The high priest was not asking whether Jesus was either an “anointed one” or a “son of God” in some general sense, but rather whether he was *the* anointed one who was God.

If Jesus said “Yes” to that question, then Jesus would claim to be God, and that of course was a capital offense.

III. The Affirmation by Jesus (14:62)

Third, notice the affirmation by Jesus.

And Jesus said, “I am” (14:62a).

But Jesus did not stop there. He added details about the kind of Christ and Son of God he was. He said, **“And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven”** (14:62b). This was a reference to the vision of Daniel, in which he described the divine Son of Man.

IV. The Agreement by the Sanhedrin (14:63-64)

And finally, notice the agreement by the Sanhedrin.

And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death (14:63-64).

But wait a minute! The proper next step would have been to inquire into the truth of the claim that Jesus made. Jesus was claiming to be the Anointed One who was God. The Jewish Sanhedrin should have asked Jesus to prove his claim.

Jesus could have pointed out some of the following:

1. According to the Scriptures, the Messiah was to have been born in Bethlehem, and Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Luke 2:1-7).

2. The Messiah was to be born of a virgin, and Jesus was born of Mary, who was a virgin at the time of his birth (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:24-25; Luke 1:26-30).
3. The Messiah was to be of David's lineage, and Jesus was descended from King David (2 Samuel 7:12, 16; Isaiah 11:1-2; Matthew 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-37).
4. The Messiah was to do many great works, and Jesus had performed the miracles that were prophesied (Isaiah 61:1-2; Matthew 11:1-6; John 1:19-23).

Regarding his claim to be God, Jesus could have said:

1. There are references in the Old Testament to precisely the kind of unique Son of God Jesus claimed to be (Psalm 2:7; Isaiah 9:6).
2. Many Old Testament passages show that God appeared among men (Genesis 16:13; 18:13, 17, 26; Exodus 3:1-6; Judges 13; Daniel 3:25).
3. The Old Testament speaks of God becoming flesh (Isaiah 7:14).

The fact is that Jesus is the Messiah who is God. The Jewish leaders thought that Jesus was committing blasphemy when he was actually simply telling them the truth. He really was the Messiah who is also God.

Conclusion

What do you think of the accusations against Jesus? And what do you think of Jesus' affirmation?

It is important to consider Jesus' affirmation to be the Messiah who is God. Because, in reality, it is no longer Jesus who is on trial. You are the one who is on trial, and the question you must answer is: what will you do with Jesus? Will you condemn him as deserving death, as the Jewish Sanhedrin did? Or, will you submit to him as Messiah and God?

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