

## **Introduction**

A news article from USA Today from November 12, 2020 reads as follows:

The first thing he did was hug his mom. Joseph Webster, 41, was released from custody in Nashville on Tuesday after nearly 15 years in Tennessee prisons on a life sentence for a crime the courts now believe he did not commit. He walked out of the Downtown Detention Center to a small crowd of family and old friends who had gathered over the course of about three hours. "It's time to pick the pieces up, start my life again," he said.

What a travesty! Nearly 15 years in jail for a crime he did not commit! How do you pick up the pieces after something like that? That is injustice for sure! Bad as it is no injustice was ever so great as that which stands before us in Matthew's gospel this morning.

[Read Text and Pray]

The main idea of this text is that as far as justice is concerned, the wrong person was standing trial. It comes across in numerous ways as the narrative of the event unfolds. If the Jewish council wanted the real blasphemers, they should have put themselves on trial. I am going to spend a considerable amount of time on the first point this morning, which is . . .

### **I. The Injustice of the Trial**

A. Nothing in the world has ever been more unjust than the trial of Jesus! The trial violated so many principles of fairness and righteousness and truth that it is impossible to list them all. But I want to show you several so you will feel it. You know it, but you need to feel the injustice that went on when the Jewish Council put Jesus on trial.

Let's begin with God's prescription for justice among his people. In Deuteronomy 16 the Lord instructed his people about the way they should go about administering justice. He commanded:

You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

It is clear from these commands that God is exceedingly concerned about justice. He delights in righteous judgment. He ordered Israel to conduct their judicial proceedings in such a way as not to warp or pervert fairness and truthfulness and accuracy. This is the way God judges. Psalm 89:14 declares, "righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne." God clearly desires that same standard be the foundation of justice enacted among his people.

God's love of truth and accuracy in enacting justice are evident in the ninth commandment. It is a commandment which prohibits lying and dishonesty, but the prohibition is expressed in terms of court. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). In fact, God's law called for the stiffest of penalties for those who were caught bearing false witness. Deuteronomy 19 prescribes that "if a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing," and it is discovered

through examination that he is a false witness, "then you shall do to him as he meant to do to his brother." In other words, the false accuser should face the consequences for whatever wrongdoing he falsely accused his neighbor. A man who would dare to falsely accuse someone of a capital crime would himself be subject to death. In this way God wanted to purge the land of evil by upholding justice. Others would learn from the stiff penalty and not commit that kind of evil among the people. And God's deep desire was for justice to be preserved.

Now, in addition to the Mosaic law, the rabbis had added numerous regulations for judicial proceedings. They further undergirded the pursuit of fairness and justice. Rabbinic law assured the right to a public trial, defense counsel, and conviction only on the grounds of at least two reliable witnesses. A sentence of death could be carried out only after a three days period of time in which the court members were supposed to fast to be certain of their conviction. And this meant a trial could not take place during a feast such as Passover when the people were forbidden to fast.

Besides the Mosaic law and the rabbinic traditions, there were established procedures of the Jewish court itself. Those procedures disallowed self-incrimination. A defendant's confession was insufficient for his conviction. In addition, any witnesses would be required to identify the month, day, hour, and location of any occurrence about which they testified. Moreover, the court itself could not initiate charges, and it was always required to presume innocence until proven otherwise. And then, there was also this striking stipulation that no criminal trial could begin at night or carry forward into the night. All of these stipulations were meant to preserve justice and lean towards mercy.

John MacArthur rightly reflects on these details that, "It is obvious that, when properly administered, the Jewish system of justice was not only eminently fair but merciful. It is just as obvious that the system did not operate either fairly or mercifully in Jesus' trial, because [those gathered in the court of the high priest that night] violated virtually every principle of its own system of jurisprudence. Jesus was illegally tried without first having been charged with a crime. He was tried at night and in private, no defense was permitted him, and the witnesses against him had been bribed to falsify their testimony. He was executed on the same day He was sentenced, and consequently, the judges could not have fasted on the intervening day that should have transpired and had no opportunity to reconsider their verdict." (MacArthur, 201)

In almost every way, shape, and form, this trial was an absolute mockery. I recently saw a movie about a Russian spy. Rudolf Ivanovich Abel was apprehended and put on trial in the United States in the 1950's. In the midst of the cold war, anxiety was at a high level. Suspicion of and contempt for the Russians permeated American society. So when Abel was put on trial, society as a whole exerted pressure for a conviction and a death sentence. The film portrayed the fact that the authorities went out of their way to make the trial LOOK like it was conducted fairly and according to the law, but that is all it was—an appearance. Even in the good old USA in the 1950's, justice was perverted. The man was judged before the trial. But still that was nothing compared to the sham that took place in Jerusalem when Jesus stood before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. There was injustice upon injustice upon injustice. There was no evidence. The witnesses were telling lies as plain as day. The prejudice was on vindictive display.

By way of application, we should take away from this picture how not to treat others unfairly; how not to be fueled by personal dislike; how not to be prejudiced; how not to take personal vengeance; how not to deal in anger and self-righteousness; and how not to bear false witness, all of which are examples of evil before God.

B. But now, let's consider how Jesus responded to all the injustice. Most of the time, he just remained silent! Finally, he spoke when he was ordered to, but did so with an abundance of self-control. Peter had taken a seat with the guards to see what would happen. And what he saw was the righteous Son of God beautifully bearing up under the highest expression of injustice in history. In Peter's first epistle this image was on his mind when he instructed Christians who were servants how to relate to their masters. He wrote, "Servants be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. . . . For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." The floodgates opened and injustice billowed out upon the Lord. And in the face of it all, he endured, righteously trusting his Father. When he was vilified, he restrained himself. And in this way Jesus is the model for how we should behave when we experience injustice.

Cries for justice abound in our day, and we would like to say it is all out there somewhere. However, each of us have our own experiences of violation. It happens in traffic. It happens at work, in church, and in our homes to varying degrees. People accuse us falsely. People trample on our rights. They wrong us, take advantage of us, and act unfairly toward us. We are reviled. Evil things are said. What are we then to do? Remember Jesus. That's what we need to do. He stood there silently and finally spoke the truth and a warning but without personal vindictiveness, without retaliation. The level of injustice he faced was through the roof. Compare that with the injustice the world dishes out to us. It is nothing. And yet our tendency is to defend ourselves, to return evil for evil, to revile when we are reviled. We need to understand the opportunity afforded when injustice happens to us. We can follow the example of Jesus and show him to others. His example should fuel humility and patience and trust and comfort to know our shepherd is still with us.

C. Besides teaching us how we should deal with injustice in our lives, this pitiful excuse for a trial also points us to true justice by setting itself in contrast to it. I find it striking that when Peter speaks of Jesus as an example of suffering under injustice, he indicates that what Jesus was doing was continuing to entrust himself to him who judges justly. The abundance of injustice that characterized the trial of Jesus is set squarely and completely in opposition to the justice of God. When we behold the injustice of the world, it will disturb us, but our consolation is to entrust ourselves to him who judges justly. God is righteous. He is just. And he is a judge. He will bring every person to their proper account. The Apostle Paul told the Athenians that God "has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31).

Psalm 9:7-8 says, "the Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness."

Deuteronomy 32:4 contains several lines from the Song of Moses. Those lines declare that "The Rock, his word is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he."

Here is the thing. As backward and prejudiced, unfair and evil, corrupt and perverted as was the trial of Jesus, even so far in the other direction is the justice and judgment of God. It is perfect and straight and even and fair and right and good. He will not bend the rules to get a conviction nor will he have to. Everything hidden will be revealed. Not only evil works but evil motives will also be uncovered. God will not punish the righteous nor will he leave the guilty unpunished. And he will

mete out judgment that accords precisely with the evils that are done. "Vengeance is mine I will repay, says the Lord." No one who deserves God's favor will be disfavored and no one who deserves his wrath will receive more than he deserves.

The concerning reality of God's justice is that among humanity there is no one who is righteous, no, not one; . . . all have turned aside and become worthless; no one does good, not even one." So, how can anyone be justified in his sight. In other words, how can anyone meet the standard of righteousness required by perfect justice? How can a sinner who justly deserves divine wrath be approved and accepted by the God of perfect justice and righteousness?

This question is precisely what Paul the Apostle addresses in Romans 3. The justice or righteousness of God has been manifested through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and ARE JUSTIFIED BY HIS GRACE AS A GIFT through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God put him forth as a propitiation by his blood. In other words God offered his sinless Son to absorb the justice due to sin. Those who are justified are those who by faith receive the gift of justification. In this way, as Paul declares, God is both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Later, in chapter 8, he definitively asserts that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus . . . for God has done what the law could not do. By sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled." The justice of God is glorified in his grace and righteousness and salvation. Without compromising justice one iota, he has brought his favor and blessing on those who deserved his wrath. And the justice of God guarantees that this justification will never be overturned. The payment was made once and for all.

If by faith you possess the priceless gift of God's grace, O give thanks. O rejoice. O resolve again this morning to seek the face of your Savior! Stand in awe of the perfect justice of God and how in wisdom he nevertheless gives mercy and grace to sinners! Say with Paul, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

If you are mindful today that you are a sinner before the just and holy God, and you have not received the gift of justification, he offers it to you this morning. You receive that gift as you turn to him and trust in the satisfying work performed by Jesus. Being perfect and pure, he was judged guilty not only by this kangaroo court but graciously by God himself. And he was crushed for our iniquities and by his stripes those who trust him are declared righteous. Only trust him and he will save you.

Now there are three outstanding aspects of the trial of Jesus which really stand out and which I want to mention before we conclude.

## **II. The Absence of Evidence**

The council had no charges to bring against Jesus that would warrant his death. They resorted to seeking false testimony against him for that end. They were so determined to put Jesus to death that as a court they were willing to bulldoze the ninth commandment to do so. But they could not even find a reliable pair of false witnesses. Then here comes this inaccurate accusation that he said something about destroying and rebuilding the temple in three days. No valid accusation could be leveled against Jesus because he was without sin and without guilt. The beauty of the failure to find a valid accusation against Jesus corresponds to the fact that before the holy gaze of his Father, he is

just as faultless. Before the gaze of the Father who weighs not only actions but also the thoughts and intentions of the heart, Christ is spotless. He knew NO sin. No deceit was found in his mouth. He was like a lamb without blemish or spot. And that is why he was able to stand in our place and become a propitiation in his blood.

### **III. The Self-Incriminating Confession of Jesus**

We have pointed out that Jewish court procedure forbade that a person's own testimony could be used to convict of a capital crime. However, having no basis upon which to convict Jesus, the high priest adjured the Lord to say plainly whether he is the Messiah.

Jesus affirmed the high priest's words, and complimented them with a reference to Daniel's prophecy. Jesus said, "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Listen now to Daniel 7:13-14. "Behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom shall not be destroyed." You may know the saying, "Leave no doubt." Jesus left no doubt here before the council. He is Messiah.

Christ-followers, let there be no doubt in your heart today. Jesus is king. He is the eternal king over all peoples and nations and tongues. Our nation's government is spewing in his face. But it will not be able to overturn Christ's rule any more than the Jewish council.

### **IV. The Self-Incriminating Cry of the Council**

Do you all remember about this time last year what the Speaker of the House did on nation-wide television? It was at the conclusion of the President's state of the union speech. In order to make a scene, she held up the manuscript of the speech and ripped it in two as though to express outrage and horror at what had been said. Such was the message sent by the priest when he tore his robe. "He has uttered blasphemy! We don't need any witnesses!" He turned to the council, "You have heard this blasphemy."

Of course it is only blasphemy if untrue. And that assumption was already made. What is your judgment? He deserves death! And then the mockery ensued. The council is the real criminal here. There are so many compromises of justice you can hardly count them. And to top it off they sentence the Messiah to death for saying he is the Messiah! The wrong man was on trial here! It should have been every one of them. And one day they will stand trial not in a court of compromise and injustice but before the holy throne of God. So will all others who have not owned Jesus as Savior and Lord. And the sentence likewise will be death—eternal death. God will take just vengeance on his enemies.

The world in which we live is fallen and full of contempt for truth and righteousness and real justice. It calls evil good and good evil. It mocks and laughs at what it hates. It may not be a pleasant reminder, but it is a necessary one that all Christ-followers need to keep in mind especially in our day. If they treated Jesus this way, they will treat his followers this way too. Remember and be prepared.

### **Conclusion**

The world will put Christ's followers on trial. The trials will be filled with injustice. And when it pours out, just remember Jesus and hold fast to him.

## **Prayer**

### **Benediction**

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to make you stand blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.