

Guilty Of Death

The speed with which this night's events unfolded suggests a great deal of planning and preparation on the part of the Jewish council. Having gained the help of Judas to betray Jesus they could not let their prey slip away. The pressure they were under to achieve their aim and secure the death of Jesus was significant.

A big undertaking

Not only had the mob to be recruited, armed and dispatched to arrest Jesus and bring Him to the high priest, but the council of the Sanhedrin had to be assembled. Witnesses had to be found, paid and brought before the court to testify. Servants, guards and officers had to be at their posts. All this despite it being the evening of the most holy feast in the Jewish religious calendar when families were supposed to eat together and remain together indoors.

A 'kangaroo' court

Jesus' captors led Him to the palace of the high priest where, we are told, 'were assembled all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes'. In fact, this court before which Jesus was tried was illegal under Jewish law. Capital crimes such as blasphemy had to be tried during the day and could not be heard during the hours of darkness. They should also be conducted with a view to clearing the accused, i.e. with a presumption of innocence, but this court was seeking one outcome and from the outset only presented evidence by which they might condemn Jesus to death.

Seeking a crime to fit the punishment

But there was a problem. Mark tells us, 'the council sought for witness against Jesus to put him to death; and found none. For many bare false witness against him, but their witness agreed not together'. The sense here is not so much that the witnesses could not get their stories straight and so contradicted one another, but that their accusations were paltry and did not justify the penalty of death. Those who spoke of the destruction and rebuilding of the temple in three days bore 'false witness' by misquoting and misapplying Jesus words, but even then the allegations were simply not equal to a sentence of death.

Evidence to satisfy Roman justice

Jesus' silence was not helping. That He did not speak implied He gave no credit to the witnesses and no legitimacy to the court. It also showed He knew the time of His death had come and submitted fully to it. The Jews could not legally kill Jesus themselves and knew they needed real evidence with which to go to Pilate, the Roman governor, if the sentence of death was to be carried out. A sense of frustration was building. Despite so much effort in getting Jesus to this point no crime could be made to stick.

A straight answer to a straight question

When Caiaphas the high priest rose to speak he asked his question in the form of an oath which compelled the Lord to answer. Caiaphas drew on the language of Psalm 2 and used names attributed to Jesus by His followers. He demanded, 'Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' or as Matthew records it, 'I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God'. The Lord's answer is direct, emphatic and affirmative – 'I am'.

You shall see my glory

The Lord knew His words would supply the excuse they sought. They would not believe His claim so at once Jesus provides a prophetic application to confirm His true identity. Speaking of Himself the Lord says, 'Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven'. The men who sat in judgment of the Lord will someday see Him again when He comes to judge them in righteousness and truth.

A full confession

These words from the Lord were all these men needed. Witnesses were unnecessary when they had a claim of divinity from Christ's own lips. In dramatic style the high priest tore his clothes, a sign to all present that conviction was a foregone conclusion. Accordingly, all those present condemned the Lord to death.

Shameful treatment

The shameful abuse that followed shows the evil nature of sin and the cruel spirit of man. Either for themselves, or for their masters, the servants of Christ's judges slapped and battered His face, and insulted their defenceless prisoner. In doing so they accomplished Isaiah's prophecy, 'I hid not my face from shame and spitting' (Isaiah 50:6).

A broader context

As we consider the events of the Saviour's suffering and shame at the hands of His enemies, let us realise how the Lord was all the time interposing Himself in the place of His people. Caiaphas spoke prophetically when he said, Jesus should be put to death 'for the people, and that the whole nation perish not'. So it proved, Jesus was put to death that the whole nation of His elect might go free.

In our place

In Christ our Representative we see the Saviour bound and led to trial instead of us. The Lord was charged with crimes instead of us, and beaten with many stripes instead of us. He bore our guilt and He carried our sorrow instead of us. In all this we see the Lord enduring the penalty for sin that rightly should have fallen upon us. Let us always remember; He suffered and died in our place, instead of us.

Amen

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