
The Sanhedrin's Sentence

*“When it was day, the Council of elders of the people assembled, both chief priests and scribes, and they led Him away to their council chamber, saying, ‘If You are the Christ, tell us.’ But He said to them, ‘If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I ask a question, you will not answer’”
(Luke 22:66–68).*

At the beginning of the day, Jesus was taken before the entire Sanhedrin for their final verdict. Caiaphas, the president of the Council, had already pronounced Him guilty of blasphemy (Matthew 26:65), and he had gotten the Council members who were present with him to declare that Jesus was worthy of death (Matthew 26:66). Following these preliminary judgments, our Lord was mocked, ridiculed, beaten, and slapped. Matthew wrote, “Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, and said, ‘Prophesy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?’” (Matthew 26:67). This humiliation of the Son of God can hardly be imagined! Apparently, members of the highest court among the Jews had participated in this beating of Jesus before the official sentence was even announced!

As Jesus stood before the Sanhedrin, He no doubt portrayed in His bruised face, disheveled hair, and torn clothing the wild frenzy of mockery that He had been through. The judges before whom He stood had pre-judged Him; but now they wanted to interrogate Him again, so that they might give the appearance of holding a formal trial before sending Him to Pilate, the Roman governor. Perhaps in this assembly they were trying to finalize what they would say to Pilate to get a conviction from him. It would be incumbent upon them to present a case he would readily accept, evidence that would compel him to issue the death sentence.

They began their examination of Jesus by demanding, “If You are the Christ, tell us.” Jesus had already responded affirmatively to

this question before Caiaphas (Matthew 26:63, 64). However, they wanted Him to repeat His answer as they continued their attempts to get Jesus to offer self-incriminating evidence. His words rebuked this high council for their ulterior designs: “If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I ask a question, you will not answer” (Luke 22:67b, 68). Their actions of the past (Matthew 21:23–27) and in the present indicated that they were not seeking the truth about Jesus (Matthew 26:59). He knew that they had already chosen to reject the truth of His deity, regardless of how clearly the evidence was presented and regardless of how many times it might be revealed to them.

Jesus reminded them of the consequence of their choices. He said, “But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (Luke 22:69). God is always the God of second and third opportunities. He relentlessly appeals to us to yield to His will. Even though Jesus knew that these men had crossed the line of no return, He continued to caution and challenge them with who He really was and with what He would be doing in the future. While standing before Caiaphas earlier, He had mentioned this prophecy of what the future held for them (Matthew 26:64). Bringing it up again, perhaps as an act of mercy, He reminded the assembled Council that He, the eternal Judge, would one day judge them.

The Sanhedrin asked one more question: “Are You the Son of God, then?” To this question, Jesus answered, “Yes, I am” (Luke 22:70). He had waited until His trials before Caiaphas

and the Sanhedrin to declare in unmistakable language that He was the Son of God. God the Father had announced it (Matthew 3:17), and Peter had declared it (Matthew 16:16); but Jesus had chosen these halls as the setting where He would say it with a clarity that no one could misunderstand.

The Sanhedrin made this personal statement the focus of their investigation. They said, "What further need do we have of testimony? For we have heard it ourselves from His own mouth" (Luke 22:71). They had made their decision. It must have been unanimous. No doubt, Nicodemus and Joseph were absent (see Mark 15:43; John 19:39). The Sanhedrin found Jesus guilty of blasphemy, and they would set out to require the death sentence.

In this way, the first three trials of Jesus—the Jewish, or religious, trials—ended. Emerging from these trials was one major conviction: the crime of blasphemy. This was the best they could do with the evidence they had been able to dig up. Jesus' enemies had to twist the facts to get this conviction, but they managed to do it without any pangs of conscience. They knew that they would have to twist the words of Jesus even more to make them into a palatable case for Pilate. The only way they could get Pilate's concurring judgment was through corrupting what Jesus had said, making His words into a claim that He was a rival king. This they would do, so "they bound Him, and led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor" (Matthew 27:2).

This corrupted court reminds us that no one is so blind as the one who refuses to see. By deciding that they would not accept the truth about Jesus, they plunged themselves into the worst darkness that any human being can know. Helen Keller¹ was once asked, "What is worse than being blind?" She answered, "It is having good eyesight but no vision." These leaders had trained minds, positions of authority, and the greatest opportunity of all time for learning; but they threw all of it away because no love of the truth was in their hearts.

¹Helen Keller (1880–1968) was an American author and lecturer. Though blind and deaf from an early age, she overcame her disabilities and learned to speak, write, and read (Braille), graduating with honors from Radcliffe College in 1904.

These sophisticated judges demonstrate how corrupt and brutal false religion can be. These men were not civil magistrates; they were the top religious leaders of their day. Instead of their religion turning them into godly men who daily sought God's will, it had made them into cruel tyrants. They had become men who not only sought to squelch the truth, but who would, at all costs, destroy the One who embodied divine truth. They were willing to connive, falsify evidence, lie, humiliate, and devote their energy to sending an innocent man to crucifixion—all because they despised the truth that He brought. Perhaps the most chilling words in the New Testament come at the end of Paul's description of those who "did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved." He wrote, "For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness" (2 Thessalonians 2:10–12).

These men who judged Jesus confirm the truth of Jesus' parable—that the heart of man makes all the difference. (See Luke 8:5–15.) Did these judges reject the Son of God because they lacked evidence? No, they had the testimony of Jesus' miracles, the announcement from heaven, His perfect life, and His supernatural teachings. They had the highest evidence! Did they reject Him because they did not hear what He said? No, they heard Him; they even tried to use His statements of truth against Him. Their rejection of Jesus comes down to a long-understood truth: What man is inside—in his soul and in his heart—determines what he does with the truth. Did Jesus not tell us this? "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:7, 8). He also gave us this heart-warming assurance: "If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself" (John 7:17).

These council members teach us that the admirable places in history are only carved out by what we do with the truth, and not by anything else. Popularity, positions of fame, wealth, and opportunities for glory quickly fade, becoming as useless as wilted flowers. Indeed, the world

will pass away and also its lusts; “but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:17b). These men of the Sanhedrin are remembered with disgust because they rejected the truth; however, the one who abides in the truth is remembered with delight by man and is remembered in the Book of Life by God.

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Jesus was crucified because He told the truth—truth which the religious and political elite did not want and refused to accept. He was crucified because He declared to the ecclesiastical council that He was the Son of God and the Messiah of Israel, and because He claimed before the worldwide tribunal that He was the Christ, the King. He was crucified because an envious religious council did not want to lose its prized religion, its position of leadership, its hold on the people, and its place of prosperity.