Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Some of the most watched events in the history of TV are courtroom trials. Think of the Nuremberg trials and the Watergate trial and OJ Simpson’s trial; they all had huge audiences. And next year, here in NZ, you can be sure that every moment of the trial of the mosque terrorist will be closely watched by a world-wide audience. And we can add to this the fact that courtroom trials are one of the most popular categories of novel, podcast, movie, and TV drama.

And because of this, many of us will know about legal terms like Miranda rights, cross examination, “I object, your honour; hearsay.” “Objection sustained!” double jeopardy, statute of limitations, and we could go on and on… And these terms are familiar because people don’t just walk into a courtroom and make up what they are going to do on the spot; there are statues and precedents and procedures that must be followed. And this is why you hear the same things over and over.

Well, we are going to see that these things also existed in Jesus’ day. We are going to hear a lot about the legal system from Jesus’ day because it really is vital to how we understand what John describes here. But don’t worry, this will not be a university lecture about Jewish law, it will be a sermon about what these events mean for our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and living the Christian life.

And I say event*s* (plural) because our passage is not just about a trial; it is also about three denials. So today we also get to learn a new word – **intercalation**. To intercalate is to add or insert something into an existing thing. And intercalation is common in literature. For example, if an author took a recipe for a meal and added stories from his or her childhood about each ingredient of the recipe, then those childhood stories would be an intercalation – they are something added into the recipe. And you sometimes find intercalation in the Gospels if it suits the theological purpose of the author. And we have an example of it here as John intercalates the account of Peter’s denials into the account of Jesus’ first trial. The two events would have happened at more or less the same time but it is clear that John has put the account of Peter’s denials inside the account of Jesus’ trial to contrast the two events. And so, **as the trials of Jesus begin, we see that while Jesus is denying *nothing* Peter is denying *everything***. And there will be some things we can learn from the injustice of Jesus’ trial and Peter’s denials but the chief question we will all have to answer from this passage is: What is your verdict about Jesus? Will you reject Jesus or embrace Him?

So the two main sections of the sermon will be **the account of Jesus’ first or Jewish trial** and then **the account of Peter’s denials**.

1. So we begin with **the account of Jesus’ first or Jewish trial** where we see that Jesus denies nothing.
   1. And this is Jesus’ first trial because v28 begins the account of Jesus’ second trial, which was before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. But this first trial was before the Jewish leaders.
      1. And the Jewish leadership or council was called the **Sanhedrin**. It owed its origins to what we read in Numbers 11, which is where the Lord told Moses to appoint 70 men from among the elders of Israel to help him judge the people. So you had 70 elders plus Moses, which made 71. And so, the Sanhedrin of Jesus’ day was made up of 71 members – usually 23 priests, who represented *religious* life in Israel, 23 scribes (or teachers of the law), who represented *legal* life in Israel, and 23 elders, who represented *democracy* in Israel, plus two presiding officers. And only the full Sanhedrin, or at least a quorum of all its members, could judge a capital or death penalty case. But note also, as we see in v31, that the Jews were not allowed to execute anyone without Roman agreement.
      2. And the fact that only the full Sanhedrin could judge capital cases is noteworthy because that helps us see that what we read in vv12-14 and 19-24 was not a part of the *actual* Jewish trial. Let me explain.
         1. **Annas**, who we read about in v13, was not the sitting High Priest. In those days, because the Romans were in charge, they appointed or approved a High Priest to serve and then fired him if they were unhappy with him before appointing/approving his replacement. And Annas had been ‘fired’ by the Romans about 15 years before this time. It was his Son-in-law, **Caiaphas**, who was the current High Priest. But John still called Annas the High Priest in v19 because according to God’s law, the High priest was High Priest for life. And Annas was a very influential man in Jewish life. In fact, on either side of Caiaphas’ term as High Priest, five of Annas’ sons served as the High Priest!
         2. But the key point is that the official Jewish trial of Jesus began after what we read in v24, where Annas sent Jesus to Caiaphas. And John doesn’t actually tell us about that trial but we are told about it in the other Gospels. What that means though is that what we read about here is really a kind of pre-trial interview.

* 1. But even this pre-trial interview had a number of legal problems.
     1. To begin with, Jewish law permitted arrests only on the basis of a specific and formal accusation by **at least two witnesses**. But of course, it was the middle of the night and it was only a couple of hours ago that Judas had arrived offering to betray Jesus. And none of the members of the Sanhedrin were allowed to act as witnesses because they were the judges. Later on, at Jesus’ actual trial before Caiaphas, the required ‘witnesses,’ which I deliberately put in inverted commas, had been rustled up, but they had not been rustled up yet. So what we should read in v19 is that Annas asked to see the charge sheet and the witnesses but because neither existed He set Jesus free. But that’s not what we read, is it; instead he engaged in a highly illegal ‘fishing expedition,’ by questioning Jesus and trying to get Him to incriminate Himself.
        1. And **Jesus knew that all this was illegal**, as we see in vv19-23. For having been questioned about His disciples and His teaching, His response basically adds up to, Where are your witnesses? He knew that He should not have been questioned, and He knew that because all that He had said and done had been done in public, there could be no witnesses to any crimes because He was guilty of nothing!
        2. And **Jesus’ knowledge of the law is seen also in vv22-23**. For having called on Annas to reveal the required witnesses, an officer struck Jesus and said, “*Is that how you answer the High Priest*?” And indeed, **Exodus 22:28** says, “*You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people*.” So Jesus said to that officer, “*If what I said was wrong* (meaning if I am guilty of cursing a ruler of God’s people then charge me)*;* *but if what I said was right, why do you strike me*?” And it is clear from the silence that followed that the officer knew that he had no case. But it is also clear that Jesus could have sought justice against this officer or that Annas could have charged this officer, because it was actually illegal to hit a defendant.
        3. In fact, **Jewish law required the judges to take the side of the accused in a trial**. Because God speaks so often in the OT about the need for widows and orphans and the poor to receive justice, the legal code required the judges to take the side of the accused as a preventative against injustice. So this is one way that John helps us to see that there will be no justice for Jesus here.
     2. But **the second thing that Annas should have done was wait until the morning**. You see, according to Jewish law, death penalty cases could only be held between the morning sacrifice and the evening sacrifice; not at night! But if you look at v28 you will see that they took Jesus to the Roman governor’s headquarters *when it was early in the morning*. So this pre-trial interview and the actual trial before Caiaphas were held during the night and therefore illegal.
     3. But all this was completely illegal for a third reason, which is that **a death penalty trial could not be held on the day before a Jewish feast day**. And the morning spoken of in v28 was Passover day and the next day was the Feast of Unleavened Bread.
     4. So the trial of Jesus should never have gone ahead when it did and in fact it should never have gone ahead at all! It was all completely illegal.
  2. And even though **John** **doesn’t mention the specifics of the trial before Caiaphas**, if you are familiar with the account, you will know that the Sanhedrin officers tried to get false witnesses to agree but they were unsuccessful until two people came forward with a twisted version of something Jesus had said. But not even that twisted testimony was sufficient and so Caiaphas put Jesus under oath and said, “*Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God*.” And Jesus did not deny this ‘accusation,’ because, of course, it was true! And then we are told that Caiaphas’ tore his robes and accused Jesus of blasphemy and called on the Sanhedrin to deliver their judgment, and they answered, “*He deserves death*.”
     1. Now, this was illegal, as we have seen, because a defendant could not be compelled to give testimony and judges were supposed to argue on behalf of the accused.
     2. It was illegal also because the law said **you could not hold a trial and pronounce the verdict on the same day**. At least one night had to pass before the verdict was pronounced to prevent hasty sentences and to allow time for appeals or reviews or a change of mind by the Judges. But Jesus was tried, sentenced, and executed on the same day.
     3. But it was also wrong because **the case should have failed with the lack of credible witnesses**. You see, according to Jewish trial law, for witness testimony to be credible, the witnesses had to have seen the accused *and each other* at the scene of the crime, and their testimony had to be in full agreement, and they had to have warned the accused of the legal consequences of the crime before the crime was committed. And this last requirement was in case the accused was ignorant of the law and also to help prove intent, because if someone tells you that if you do this you will face this punishment and you still do it, then it is clearly pre-meditated and meant. Now, if you are thinking to yourself, Wow! With all of those requirements, how did they ever get a conviction? And that is the exact point. Because one of the Ten Commandments is You shall not kill, which meant that life was held in the highest regard, the benchmark for securing a death penalty sentence was as high as it could possibly be. In the **Mishnah**, which is the Jewish book of laws and rules, it says that the Sanhedrin that condemns one man to death in a seven year period “is a slaughterhouse.” The point is that according to their own rules the Sanhedrin were supposed to look for any and every reason not to condemn a man to death, but with Jesus they were looking for any reason to condemn Him to death.
  3. I trust you can see, then, that this was **a massive injustice** at every level. There is just no way that Jesus should have been condemned to death. And two points of application that flow out of the injustice suffered by Jesus are as follows:
     1. Earlier we read Isaiah’s prophecy from around 700 years before this trial that Messiah would be like an innocent lamb that is led to the slaughter, and taken away by oppression and judgment, “*although He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in His mouth*.” And now that was prophecy was being fulfilled. And what this injustice revealed was the absolute and perfect innocence of Jesus and the complete and total corruption of mankind.
        1. So turn with me to **2 Corinthians 5:21** (p. 966). “*For our sake [the Father] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God*.” My friends, what we need to understand about ourselves is that we are desperately corrupt and wicked sinners and that Jesus is a perfect and righteous Saviour.
        2. If you think that you are a pretty good person, overall, then you are either ignorant or dishonest about this matter. Or while you might not have murdered anyone or robbed a bank, God’s law forbids all lust and all selfishness and all unkindness and all irritation and all frustration and all disobedience and all cheating, and it requires that we be perfectly pure and honest and selfless and forgiving and gentle and patient. And this is why we are all desperately wicked and corrupt. And I hope you can see that this is true of yourself.
        3. And you cannot fix this because this is your nature as a sinner. What you need is forgiveness and a new nature. And you can get this only by believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that He died on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. And the moment you believe this, your sin and guilt are taken away and God puts the perfection of Jesus into your spiritual bank account. In God’s eyes, you become a justified one – a just-as-if-I never sinned one.
        4. And that does not mean that you never sin any more, as every believer here will testify, but you now have a new nature that strives to honour God.
        5. Do you understand this? Do you believe this? Do you see how this massive injustice suffered by Jesus is a vital part of how we become children of God?
     2. If you do, then that will help with **the second point of application**. You see, we too encounter injustice. I am sure all you boys and girls could share a story of a time when you got the blame for something that you did not do. And it is sooo painful! But we suffer injustice as adults also. And while any injustice is extremely painful, it is 1000 times worse when it comes from those that it really should not come, as was the case with Jesus, here. As the leaders of the Jews and as the expert lawyers and OT teachers, the Sanhedrin should have supported Jesus and defended Jesus and believed Jesus; but instead they rejected Him and unjustly condemned Him.
        1. And just as He patiently and quietly endured the sorrow of this injustice, so He calls on us to patiently and quietly endure the sorrow of injustice. Turn to **1 Peter 2:18ff** (p. 1014). “*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 what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you 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; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls*.”
        2. Is justice a good thing to pursue? Of course it is. God is just and the Bible has much to say about justice. But the whole world likes to pursue justice. That is not unique to followers of Jesus. What is unique to followers of Jesus is choosing to “*follow in His steps*” and “*endure sorrows while suffering unjustly*”; to choose not to pursue justice and instead to entrust yourself to Him who judges justly. “*This*,” says the Spirit of the Lord, “*is a gracious thing in the sight of God*.”
        3. And let us also remember that while Jesus was perfectly sinless, that is never the case with you and me, right? We may do good and suffer for it, but even our good is never perfect, as it was with Jesus.
        4. So is this something that you need to think about today, perhaps? Boys and girls, are you angry with Mum and Dad or a teacher who has wrongly blamed you? Brothers and Sisters, are you holding on to or fighting against an injustice? Well, Christ calls you to follow in His steps and it is a gracious thing in the sight of God when you choose to ‘let it go’ and leave it to Him to judge.

1. Now, I am sure you have noticed that we have still not said a single thing about **Peter’s denials**. And while there is plenty that could be said here, we will confine ourselves to the briefest of comments before we end by tying Jesus’ trial with Peter’s denials. So let’s briefly note that while Jesus was denying nothing, Peter was denying everything.
   1. It was only a couple of hours ago that Jesus had warned Peter that he would deny him three times before the rooster crowed. But as we come to v15, Peter is with another, unnamed disciple, who most Bible commentators believe to be John, the author of this Gospel. And first of all, a servant girl at the door asked him if he was one of Jesus’ disciples, and Peter made denial number one. And then Peter went to be with the servants and officers near the fire, and again he was asked if he was a disciple of Jesus, and he made denial number two. And then, finally, a relative of the man who had had his ear cut off by Peter thought that Peter looked familiar, and Peter made denial number three. And then the rooster crowed. So again, just a few thoughts about Peter’s denials:
      1. John tells us in v15 that “***Peter followed Jesus***.” Well, Peter had been following Jesus for the last three years! So what had changed? And the answer is about 5 meters, give or take! You see, for the last three years following Jesus meant being right next to Jesus, but now Jesus has entered the courtyard, as we see in v15, but Peter was hanging back at the door. And even after he went in, he was not right next to Jesus, but near the fire with the servants and officers. And the other Gospel authors are explicit about this for they add that “*Peter followed Jesus at a distance*.”
         1. Brothers and sisters, young people and boys and girls, you cannot follow Jesus from a distance! Or to put it another way, if you are not next to Jesus, you are far more likely to give in to temptation and deny Him.
         2. So I have to ask you today: **Could it be that you too are following Jesus at a distance?** And what I mean is: You profess faith in Jesus but He is not a big part of your thoughts and words and actions as each day unfolds. Participation in church activities, personal Bible reading, prayer, obeying His commandments, serving, evangelism, Christian fellowship; these things are not priorities for you because you are way more occupied with your career or your studies or your hobbies or sports or recreation or time with non-believing friends? And if this is how it is with you then I must warn you that you are in a spiritually dangerous place. You need to see that Christ and His people are worth so much more than the spare change of your time and affections.
         3. Now, none of us can be physically next to Jesus today. But He has told us in His word that He is the head and the church is His body. So the chief way that we remain next to Jesus today is by immersing ourselves, fully, in the life of the church. This is why we preach about the importance of church membership and attendance at every worship service and Bible studies and fellowship and service. For this is how we walk next to Jesus today.
         4. So if you have been following Jesus at a distance, go to Him in prayer and confess your sin and ask the Spirit of the Lord to help you put Christ and His church at the top of your priority list.
   2. Well, as we draw to a close, what is plain is that **rather than being a denier, Peter should have been a defender**. He and John and the other disciples should have been next to Jesus as defense witnesses. But even though it came too late for Jesus’ trial, they did eventually provide witness testimony. It is called the New Testament.
      1. Think about **Peter**:
         1. In one of the first sermons of the NT church, as recorded in **Acts 3**, Peter said to a crowd of Jews, “*Men of Israel … the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses*.” And we read that “*many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand*.”
      2. And then there is **John**:
         1. Let me remind you again what Caiaphas said to Jesus during His trial: “*Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God*.” And you have heard me quote John’s explanation for why he wrote his Gospel many times; in 20:31 he says, “*These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*.” So after Jesus rose from the dead, John went back and saw all of the OT prophecies about Messiah, made 100s of years before He came to earth, such as Him being born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), and by a virgin birth (Isa 7), and that he would be a Son of David (2 Sam 7), and that He would be preceded by an Elijah type figure (John the Baptist) (Mal 3), and that He would enter Jerusalem on a donkey (Zech 9), and that He would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver (Zech 11 & Jer 32), and that He would be despised and rejected and whipped (Isa 53), and that the serpent lifted up on a pole and Jonah spending three days in the fish’s belly were indicators of how Messiah would die and how long He would be in the tomb, and then having seen all of Jesus’ miracles and heard of all of Jesus’ sermons, John was now fully convinced that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God.

And while Peter and John’s witness testimonies were written too late to help Jesus at His trial, they were written at just the right time for you! So the most important question today is What is your verdict? You have heard the evidence. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and He is the Saviour we need. Amen.