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. And what we will learn is that what happened to Jesus was **a legal travesty**. And travesty means a sham or a farce or a charade. We won’t have time to consider all of the Jewish laws that were broken but we will note enough of them to see that the trial of Jesus was completely illegal. But we will also see that it absolutely had to happen in order for Jesus to be the Saviour we need. And 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 because the **account of Jesus’ first or Jewish trial** is told in parallel with the account of **Peter’s denials**, we are going to see **how the trial and the denials demand our verdict about Jesus**.

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. But this is how He needed to die in order for Him to be the Saviour we need:
     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.
     2. Turn with me to **2 Corinthians 5:21**: “*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.
        1. 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.
        2. 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.
        3. 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.
        4. 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?

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.
   2. Now, there is plenty that we could usefully say about Peter and his denials. But in view of our main point today, what should Peter have been doing at this moment? Where should he have been? He should have been next to Jesus; **rather than being a denier, he should have been a *defender***. He should have been next to Jesus as a defense witness! But we know that the things that happened to Jesus had to happen so that He could die and rise again and then send His Spirit upon the disciples to make them His witnesses. So while it came too late for Jesus’ trial, Peter did eventually provide witness testimony. We have it in Acts and in his letters:
      1. In the very first sermon of the NT church, as recorded in **Acts 2**, Peter preached to a crowd of Jews, some of whom may well have been present at Jesus’ trial, and he said, “*Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know- this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men … This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses*.”
         1. So Peter was now functioning as a defender/witness!
         2. And while he did not excuse the guilt of those who committed the injustice against Jesus, He wanted them to see that this was according to God’s eternal plan because it was necessary that Jesus suffer this travesty to be a complete Saviour!
         3. And having served as a witness for Jesus, we read that 3000 people believed and repented and were baptized!
         4. And you have heard all of this evidence today also. So the most important question today is **What is your verdict**? You have heard the eye-witness testimony – Jesus was illegally tried and crucified. But the injustice He suffered satisfied the justice of God and made it possible for Him to show mercy to you.
         5. And the Bible says, “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved … For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*."”Will you believe in Him today? Will you call upon Him in faith and repentance?Amen.