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Sermon Notes

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God on Trial

Matthew 26:57-68

In the Garden of Eden there stood a tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In Genesis 2:15, Adam was put in the Garden of Eden to “serve it and protect it.”

PROTECT? From WHAT?

Well, putting various passages of Scripture together, it seems that, by the time God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and entrusted the earth to him, Satan had already fallen in his failed rebellion. God had cast him to the earth. And the serpent was coming to the Garden of Eden.

Why? One theologian believes that God was bringing the chief fallen angel to Adam so that Adam would JUDGE him and condemn him.

1 Corinthians 6:3 Do you not know that we will judge angels?

So, in the wisdom of God, he brought Satan to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to be CONDEMNED by Adam! It was Satan on trial and man the judge...

But Satan cleverly turned the whole thing around... He initiated an encounter at the Tree, and not with Adam but with Eve, Adam's helper. And he turned the entire trial on its head... basically, at that first temptation, GOD WAS ON TRIAL, and ADAM, standing quietly by his wife's side, was judging God. Judging God's word (“Did God really say...?”); judging God's truthfulness and warning (“You shall not surely die!”); judging God's goodness in holding out blessings (“God knows that when you eat of it, you will become like God, knowing good and evil.”)

Satan put God on trial that day, with man the judge. And so it has been ever since.

The natural tendency of our rebellious race, we rebellious sons and daughters of Adam is to put God on trial in our hearts and minds.... Especially when it comes to the painful issue of human suffering.

Elie Wiesel, the Jewish survivor of the Nazi concentration camp in Auschwitz, said that he observed three Jewish men hold a trial of God in absentia for abandoning the Jewish people in the Holocaust. Inspired by that, he wrote a play in 1979 called “The Trial of God,” set in a Ukrainian village in 1649 after the massacre of some Jewish villagers. In Wiesel's play, three traveling minstrels arrive in the village intending to put on a play, but instead put on a mock trial of God for the massacre.

C.S. Lewis wrote a book called “God in the Dock”... British way of saying “God on trial...” He said that man, rather than rightly seeing themselves as standing on trial before a holy God instead prefer to see God as standing accountable to them

Whenever there is a hurricane, an earthquake, a fire, the tragic loss of a child, the shocking surprise of some adverse circumstance, hurting people immediately put God on trial. When people hear the claims of the gospel and understand that God will judge them some day, they desire to turn it around entirely. But Scripture is plain:

Hebrews 9:27 man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment

Hebrews 4:13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Even more amazing as we come to our text today... the Bible makes it plain that Jesus is in fact that judge of all the earth... every single human being will stand before Christ on Judgment Day:

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

John 5:22-23 Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son,²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.

And yet, in our text today, we have the Judge of all the earth standing before wicked, sinful, men to be judged by them...

We have GOD ON TRIAL!!

Furthermore, it is a wicked, unjust, illegal trial... one that puts the sinfulness of the human heart on full display

I. The Trials of Jesus: Jewish Justice Perverted First, Then Roman

A. Jesus' Trial Had Two Major Aspects:

1. Religious trial before the Jewish authorities
2. Secular trial before the secular (mostly Roman) authorities

Note: I believe this was to share the blame for the death of the Son of God equally between Jews and Gentiles... the gospel saves both Jews and Gentiles from sin, so it was appropriate for both Jews and Gentiles to display their wickedness and sin in condemning Jesus

B. Each of These Trials Had Three Parts

1. In the Jewish trial:

- a. First, a preliminary hearing at Annas's house, recorded in John 18:12-14 and 19-23
- b. Second, the trial before Caiaphas (the High Priest) and the Sanhedrin recorded here
- c. Third, the same group reconvened just after daybreak (Matthew 27:1)

2. In the secular trial, also three phases

- a. First, before Pontius Pilate
- b. Then, before Herod Antipas (tetrarch of Galilee who was in Jerusalem)
- c. Then, finally, before Pilate one last time

C. Amazing the Greatest Miscarriage of Justice in History Before Jews and Romans Who Prided themselves in their Justice

1. The Jewish Law was meticulous in its protection of the innocent
2. So also the Roman Legal system was one of their great gifts to the pagan world

D. Jewish Justice Established in the Laws of Moses

1. Judges selected and commanded to be just

Deuteronomy 16:18-20 Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. ¹⁹ Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. ²⁰ Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.

2. The Sanhedrin established for the purpose of justice

- a. Any community with at least 120 men could form their own council to try cases
- b. Council came to be known by the Greek term for "sitting together"—*sunedrion*
- c. Goals was to be sure everyone got a fair trial

3. Capital crimes had to be proven by clear testimony from witnesses

Deuteronomy 17:6 On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.

4. False witnesses punished severely

Deuteronomy 19:16-19 If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, ¹⁷ the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. ¹⁸ The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, ¹⁹ then do to him as he intended to do to his brother.

5. Witnesses in capital crimes had to be the first to exact the punishment... forcing them to stand behind their testimony

Deuteronomy 17:7 The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you.

6. Rabbinical law required the sentence of death could not be carried out until the third day after the trial... and the council members were to fast on the intervening day... this also gave additional time for evidence that might be used for the defense of the convicted man
7. Witnesses had to give the exact date, time, and location of the incident
8. There was always a presumption of innocence... the defense of the accused was handled with great care
9. If the verdict of death was not overturned, an officer of the council escorted the prisoner to the place of execution; a herald went ahead of the slow-moving procession declaring in a loud voice, "This man [so-and so... stating the name of the convicted man] is led to punishment for such and such a crime; the witnesses who have sworn against him are [name and name]; if anyone has evidence in his favor, come forward quickly."
10. At the place of execution, the convicted man was urged to confess his crime; then a powerful sedative drink was given to dull his senses and make his death less painful.
11. In addition:
 - a. No trial could begin or continue into the night
 - b. In the Sanhedrin, when the vote for conviction was taken, it would proceed from the youngest to the oldest, so the youngest would not be unduly influenced by the older members of the council

c. If the vote was ever unanimous, the accused was immediately set free, because the necessary element of mercy was obviously lacking

12. In all of these things, they operated under the principle: “The Sanhedrin is to save, not destroy life.”

13. The goal was not merely justice but mercy wherever possible

E. All of This Thrown Out the Window in the Case of Christ

1. The Sanhedrin violated virtually every principle of justice and mercy when it came to the trial of Jesus Christ

2. Jesus was basically condemned before even coming to a trial... the Jewish leaders had already tried and convicted Jesus illegally and unjustly in their own minds long before He stood before them

a. Jesus was illegally tried before first being charged with a crime

b. He was tried at night and in private

c. He had no defense counsel

d. There were many false witnesses and none of them was held accountable for their false testimony

e. He was executed the same day he was tried and sentence... no chance at an appeal; no opportunity for the council to fast to be sure they were doing the right thing

f. It was hastily thrown together with the barest semblance of justice because there was NO JUSTICE IN IT AT ALL!!

g. Furthermore, they treated Jesus with tremendous disgrace... mocking Him and spitting upon Him... something that should never be done in any case

WHY????

II. The Jealousy and Greed of the Jewish Enemies of Jesus (vs. 57-59)

A. Key statement: vs. 57, 59

Matthew 26:57-59 Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled....⁵⁹ The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.

See... “looking for false evidence against Jesus so they could execute Him...!!!” This was no trial but a plot... it was simply MURDER done by legal channels.

By this time, the pre-trial at Annas's had already occurred, and Jesus had exposed Annas's corruption and illegal methods:

John 18:12-14 Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him ¹³ and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. ¹⁴ Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it would be good if one man died for the people.

John 18:19-24 the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. ²⁰ "I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. ²¹ Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said." ²² When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby struck him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded. ²³ "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" ²⁴ Then Annas sent him, still bound, to Caiaphas the high priest.

B. Why Were the Jews Determined to Kill Jesus... Even With Such Prejudice and Wickedness?

1. Jesus the only perfect man that has ever lived
2. Jesus, filled perfectly with love at every moment both for God and for others
3. Jesus, who poured out His life every moment in service for the poor, broken-hearted, pain-filled
4. Jesus, the only man who has ever perfectly obeyed the Law of Moses
5. The summary from the people:

Mark 7:37 People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said.

6. The summary from the Scripture:

1 Peter 2:22-23 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

7. So... WHY the HATRED??

C. Pilate Saw It Clearly... Scripture Testifies As Well

Matthew 27:18 [Pilate] knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

D. Jealousy of Christ's Righteousness, Popularity, and Power

1. Righteousness

- a. Jesus was perfectly righteous
- b. Annas, Caiaphas, and many of the council were corrupt men who lived for pleasure and praise and money

1 John 3:12-13 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.

2. Popularity

- a. Huge crowds from all over the region flocked to follow Jesus
- b. As He rode into Jerusalem, huge crowds were praising Him and the Jews rebuked Him for allowing the crowds to praise Him
- c. Jesus' popularity was never directly connected to the Jews jealousy of Him, but it was with Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch

Acts 13:45 When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.

3. Power

- a. Jesus could do astonishing miracles, which they were not able to do
- b. His miracles only made them more jealous of Him... not desirous to follow Him
- c. Again, their jealousy over miracles is not openly stated in the gospels... but it is in the Book of Acts concerning the Apostles

Acts 5:16-18 Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed. ¹⁷ ¶ Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.

FILLED WITH JEALOUSY... they hated Jesus

But that's not all...

E. Greed for Their Position

1. They were powerful men who were using their position to make a ton of money
 - a. Annas and Caiaphas controlled the Temple concessions centered around the animal sacrifices offered there
 - b. They had many ways of making money on the sacrifices... especially by inspecting the animals to see if they had any blemishes... they often did, according to the corrupt inspectors; then preapproved animals were sold at an elevated price to pilgrims
 - c. Also, they had money-changers who would make a profit on all money changing; they wouldn't accept any currency except the Temple shekel
 - d. Since there were hundreds of thousands of animals sacrificed every year, it was a TON of money rolling in
2. Beyond that, they used their power to confiscate the property of widows
3. Jesus exposed their wickedness openly in His teaching

Luke 20:46-47 They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁷ They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

Matthew 23:27-28 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

4. Even worse, TWICE Jesus had cleansed the Temple

John 2:14-17 In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Literally: Zeal for your house will EAT ME UP... or destroy me... literally, this was a major reason why He died

F. Politics: The triumphal entry had aroused the attention of the Romans

1. The Romans wanted peace and quiet and tax money rolling in

2. Any public disturbance, and heads were likely to roll, especially among the leaders
3. Hence Caiaphas's statement:

John 11:47-50 Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." ⁴⁹ Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰ You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

G. So, Before the Trial Even Occurred, Jesus was Guilty

Matthew 26:59 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.

H. [Aside] Peter Is Following... and Getting Into Trouble... More Next Week

Matthew 26:58 But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

1. Mixed motivation: partly loyalty, partly pride, partly curiosity
2. Getting into Satan's net, about to be snared in a series of lies

III. The False Witnesses (vs. 59-61)

Matthew 26:59-61 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. ⁶⁰ But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward ⁶¹ and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"

- A. The Sanhedrin Not Looking for Truth... Because the Truth Was Against Their Evil Purpose
- B. They Orchestrated False Witnesses... Probably Bribed Them; But They Did a Terrible Job
 1. Their stories were not lining up
 2. There were major and minor discrepancies
 3. Or obvious outright fabrications

C. The Testimony About the Temple

1. Charged with blasphemy against God's holy temple
2. Later, this same Sanhedrin would execute Stephen on the same charge
3. BUT they got the statement wrong
 - a. When Jesus cleansed the Temple, they challenged His authority

John 2:18-21 Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ²⁰ The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

- b. Jesus basically said YOU destroy the temple... I will raise it up
- c. He never claimed to be the one to destroy the temple
- d. It was actually a prophecy of the very thing that was going on at that moment... they were going to destroy His body, He was going to raise it up
- e. His resurrection would be the proof of His authority and deity to the whole Jewish nation

D. False Witnesses Getting them Nowhere!! So Caiaphas Takes Matters in His Own Hands

IV. Jesus' Confession Before the High Priest (vs. 62-64)

Matthew 26:62 Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?"

A. This Was Illegal at Many Levels

1. As we've said, a man could only be to death on EVIDENCE from WITNESSES
2. Self-recriminating statements could not be admitted as the only evidence in a case
3. Furthermore, the High Priest cannot seize this role and force the matter through as He does

B. Jesus' Silence a Fulfillment of Prophecy

Isaiah 53:7 he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

C. The High Priest's Solemn Charge

Matthew 26:63 The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

1. The issue: the claim not only to Messiahship, but DEITY; to claim to be the Son of God was a claim to deity

John 5:18 For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

2. Thus the trial became a trial of BLASPHEMY

John 10:33 "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."

D. Jesus' Clear Answer

Matthew 26:64 "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

Mark 14:62 "I am," said Jesus.

E. The Appeal to Daniel 7

Matthew 26:64 "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

1. Prediction of the future
2. This scene would be fulfilled at the Second Coming AND on Judgment Day
3. For their souls, it would be TOO LATE
4. But they would know His divine nature

F. The Son of Man Vision

Daniel 7:13-14 In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

1. Astonishing proof of the deity AND humanity of Jesus!!
2. In the Daniel 7 vision, the “Ancient of Days” Almighty God, sitting on a mighty throne, ruling over the nations, with a river of fire flowing from His throne
3. Into His presence comes “one like a Son of Man”... human, yet coming right into the presence of Almighty God
4. Receives power to rule over all nations
5. All nations will WORSHIP Him... though He is a “Son of Man”
6. They were stumbling over the incarnation... how could a human being claim to be God??? But Daniel 7 opens the door for it
7. Jesus addressed the central issue in their case... the issue of blasphemy... if He was the Son of Man of Daniel 7, then He had every right to be worshiped and honored as the Son of God

V. Jesus Condemned and Degraded by the Jews (vs. 65-68)

Matthew 26:65-68 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. ⁶⁷ Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him ⁶⁸ and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

- A. The Official Rejection of Jesus as Son of God and Son of Man by the Jewish Nation

John 1:11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, He said of the Jewish nation:

Luke 19:44 ...you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

- B. The High Priest Tears His Robes

1. Melodramatic and hypocritical display of grief over the blasphemy and of supposed zeal for the glory of God
2. This was the official moment of condemnation... led directly by the evil Caiaphas, one of the very ones who'd orchestrated the entire plot against Jesus
3. He calls on

- C. The Sanhedrin Called on to Condemn Jesus by Acclamation: No Vote Needed

Matthew 26:65-66 *Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered.*

1. As with everything else in this sham trial, the normal procedure of voting was abrogated
2. They are called on to yell their approval of the High Priest's verdict
3. "BLASPHEMY" is the official charge; "GUILTY" is the official verdict... all that was left was the sentence: "DEATH"

D. Jesus Degraded and Humiliated

Matthew 26:67-68 *Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him ⁶⁸ and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"*

The hostility and evil character of these men flows out now

Their hatred for Jesus and all that He stood for

They hadn't treated other, more vile prisoners like this

But Jesus was a different case... His goodness drew their poison out and exposed it forever

Spitting in the face is one of the greatest insults anyone could ever do to another human being

But they go beyond that, and play with His supernatural powers... BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

They did not know who they were dealing with:

Jesus, blindfolded, could have told everything anyone who slapped Him had ever done:

Psalm 139:1-4 *O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. ² You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. ³ You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. ⁴ Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.*

As the Samaritan woman knew... Jesus knew everything about her!!

John 4:29 *"Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"*

VI. Applications

A. Come to Christ!!

1. As we take the long slow march to the cross in Matthew's account, let us realize that ALL of the suffering of Jesus was because WE are sinful
2. He was bearing YOUR sin as He stood condemned

“Bearing shame and scoffing rude
 In my place condemned he stood
 Sealed my pardon with His blood
 Hallelujah, What a Savior!”

3. Isaiah 53 makes this substitution even clearer

Isaiah 53:4-8 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away.

4. So... trust in Him!! Believe in Him!!

B. Marvel at the Wickedness of the Human Heart

1. How evil are the men who condemned Jesus to death!
2. How they forsook their usual commitment to justice and mercy in order to put to death the only perfect man that ever lived
3. How corrupt and evil were their motives
 - a. Jealousy because of His righteousness, power, and popularity
 - b. Greed for their position of power and money
 - c. Willing to violate all their principles of justice to murder this man

C. Understand the Tendency to Put God on Trial

1. See that we all have this tendency now... to put God on trial and make Him answer to us
2. How easy it is to forget how mighty and powerful and holy He is
3. We need to grow in the fear of the Lord

D. Understand the Son of Man Prophecy: Jesus is Coming Again to Be Worshiped and to Judge the Earth

Matthew 26:64 "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Matthew 24:30 "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory."

Revelation 1:7 Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.

Matthew 25:31-33 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."

Then the roles will be reverses... the judged will become the Judge, and every single person on the face of the earth will stand before Him!

BE READY!!