

## **THE SWORD, THE TRIAL AND THE DECLARATION      MATTHEW 26:47-68**

No one imagined that Charles Dutton would amount to anything. After all, he spent years imprisoned for manslaughter. Nevertheless, after being released from prison he has gone on to become a very successful actor on Broadway, TV and in the movies. How did he manage such a remarkable transition? His answer is compelling. “Unlike the other prisoners, I never decorated my cell,” he explained. Charles Dutton resolved never to regard his prison cell as his real home. That’s often the root problem for many people, isn’t it? We settle down, we get comfortable, we accept an approach to life or a lifestyle that’s beneath our dignity as creatures made in God’s image and as followers of the King of Kings, the Lord Jesus. Instead of getting out of the cells in life we find ourselves in, we get comfy and decorate them. All too often we consider this life and this world to be our real home when instead we should be “...looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland....” (Heb. 11:16 NIV)

We’re in the Christian season of Lent – a forty day period of time leading up to Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Sunday - when followers of Jesus all over the world are encouraged to reflect again on the significance of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection. If you’re a follower of Jesus, Lent is a time to remember that this world is not your real home or your final home. In the words of the old song, we’re just a passin’ through. This Lenten season, we’re taking a journey through three chapters in the Bible - Matthew 26, 27 and 28 – that tell us about the most amazing, incredible week in human history. Each week we pick out three snapshots from a portion of those three chapters and reflect on them together. We’re calling this series of messages, “Pictures of the Passion.” Again, “passion” is a word that is sometimes used to describe all that happened to Jesus in this one week of His life. Here’s the first picture for today:

### **THE SWORD (v. 47-56)**

Just a few hours before His crucifixion, Jesus had gone to Gethsemane to pray and receive more spiritual strength from His Father for the mighty test ahead of Him. All the disciples except Judas Iscariot were with Jesus. Judas – the disciple who betrayed Jesus - must have known that Jesus intended to go to Gethsemane that night even though he’d left the Passover Feast before it ended. Judas knew where to lead the group of men arresting Jesus. Jesus pointed out the irony of calling out the equivalent of a first century SWAT team to arrest Him. “... ‘Am I some dangerous revolutionary, that you come with swords and clubs to arrest me? Why didn’t you arrest me in the Temple? I was there teaching every day.’” (Mt 26:55 NLT)

The fact was that the Jewish leaders were afraid of Jesus. But why? What was so threatening to them about Jesus? Well, Jesus threatened their status and position. They genuinely feared that because Jesus was so popular with the common, everyday Jewish people that He would lead some kind of political,

military uprising against the Roman occupiers. They reasoned Jesus and any such rebellion would fall flat in the face of Roman military might and that would then open the door to a brutal crackdown by the Roman hierarchy. Part of the punishment would inevitably involve making the Jewish leaders step down from their privileged positions. Jesus was a loose cannon – a dangerous, unknown threat to their status and position. The best approach, then? Get rid of Him! As this arresting group started to take Jesus away, one of Jesus' disciples takes out a sword, swings it around wildly and manages to slice off the ear of one of those arresting Jesus. Over in the Gospel of John, we find out it was Peter who swung the sword. Typical Peter – courageous, impetuous and ignorant. Neither he nor any of the other disciples had a clue what was happening and why.

What can we learn from this picture of Jesus' passion? Once again, it reminds us that Jesus' death was entirely voluntary on His part. Jesus could easily have avoided this kind of arrest if He had wanted to do so. You hear that awareness when Jesus rebukes sword-swinging Peter. In effect, Jesus says, "Hey, Pete, don't you know that I could call on My Father and He would send at once about a gillion angels?" Never forget that Jesus chose to die because it was the plan and purpose of His Father. He says here, "But this is all happening to fulfill the words of the prophets as recorded in the Scriptures...." (Mt. 26:56 NLT) Jesus was never really a victim of Judas' cleverness, or the Jewish leaders' scheming or the Romans' political and military power. God was working out a strategy He had developed before the world was created. That strategy meant His perfect, sinless Son taking the penalty of our sin – death - upon Himself. When you partake of Communion this morning, remember again that Jesus died for you voluntarily. He willingly obeyed His Father. He chose to die.

It occurs to me that because Jesus chose to die, He puts you and me in a position where we need to make a choice as well. How fortunate we are to live in a period of time when God's grace and love is poured out every day upon every person! That period of time has lasted now for nearly 2,000 years. No one knows how much longer it will last. God gives you and me life here on Earth – maybe 80 years, 50 years, or only 20 years. During that time He provides you with the opportunity to choose Him. What does choosing Him mean? It means reaching out and taking the gift God offers you... recognizing that Jesus has died for you... putting your trust in Him alone for this life and for eternity... turning away from your sinful attitudes and actions and living into and under the Lordship of King Jesus. Most of us here today have made that choice. What have we found? We've discovered forgiveness of our sins, a new joy that permeates our entire lives, a whole new purpose and meaning to our existence and a wonderful sense of assurance about being with God forever after death.

But, there are also with us this morning those that have yet to make this choice. Many people in today's wider culture respect Jesus, think highly of Jesus and speak well of Jesus, but never see any need to recognize His absolute Lordship over them. When you refuse to receive the gift God is offering to you – an

eternal relationship with Him through the shed blood and broken body of His Son – you reject God essentially. When you make any choice in life that leaves God out of the picture, you lose every time. When you reject this gift or when you keep putting off that complete surrender to Jesus' Lordship, you embrace hell.

Here's one additional thought that comes from this picture of the sword. Peter and the other disciples just couldn't see how God could possibly turn this seeming defeat into a victory, this loss into a gain, this failure into a success, this suffering into glory. That's why Peter got out his sword and start swinging away! That's why all of the other disciples ran away. A few of us, like Peter, want to attack when things go bad. Most of us just prefer, like the other disciples, to run away as fast as we can from defeat, loss, failure and suffering. It's hard to receive it and believe that somehow God has a purpose in it. There's a spiritual principle to mull over here. Over and over again in the life of Jesus – and His arrest here is just one example – God turned seeming defeat into victory, loss into gain, failure into success and suffering into glory. He can and does the same for you and me if we can get as submissive to His will as Jesus was. Only the Christian can ever say, "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Rom 8:28 NLT)

There was a woman who had suffered a terrible illness and endured a long recovery. Her husband loved her very much. He waited on her constantly. During her recovery he got into the habit of carrying her from room to room. One day, her doctor said to him, "If you keep this up, she'll never walk again. She likes being carried, so she'll never even try to walk." Out of love, that husband changed his behavior. He watched his wife tremble with pain as she tried to walk. He even let her fall and painfully pick herself up. It would have been so easy for him to rush over and keep her from falling, but it would not have been love to do so. Consider your relationship with God. You blame Him when you fall. You blame Him for not rushing to your side to pick you up and take away all the pain. God refused to intervene in the suffering and death of His beloved Son. But God's holding back was neither weakness nor lack of love. There will be times in your life and mine that He will not prevent pain and He will not instantly deliver you. But, as with Jesus, He will turn your suffering into glory.

### **THE TRIAL (v. 57-62)**

When it comes to being the really creepy villain in this story of Jesus' passion, I have to choose Caiaphas over Judas any day. Yes, Judas was a bad piece of work, to be sure, but Caiaphas brought this kind of refined, cultured brilliance to his evil that puts him, in my opinion, in a different league than Judas. History doesn't tell us a lot about Caiaphas, but one fact is noteworthy. Caiaphas knew how to hold on to his position. Now, Rome had final authority in Israel at this time, but the high priest was the key Jewish political and religious leader. Between 37 BC and 67 AD – a period of 104 years – there were 28 Jewish high

priests. That's an average of less than 4 years for each high priest; in other words, lots of turnover. One guy managed to stay in office for 18 years. Want to guess who? Mr. Caiaphas. He'd learned the art of survival at any cost. He was a cunning, manipulative, back room political operative who saw in Jesus a threat to his own leadership role. He wasn't about to let this red neck, backwoods Galilean preacher incite some reckless revolt against Roman tyranny which could then threaten Caiaphas' position of privilege and power.

But on to the trial of Jesus itself. It's ironic that Jesus was tried, convicted and condemned to death in a Jewish court. Why? The Jewish system of justice, at that time, was arguably the best on the planet. It was extremely hard to convict anybody of a capital crime under Jewish law, but here we find the sinless Son of God sentenced to death by the most merciful and enlightened system of justice known to humanity at the time. Lots of illegal things happened in this trial. Like what? First, Jewish law didn't allow a trial to be held at night, but Jesus' trial was held in the wee hours of the morning. Second, Jewish law didn't allow a court to meet on the Sabbath or a feast day; nevertheless Jesus was tried on the day before the Sabbath and convicted on a feast day. Third, Jewish law didn't allow a conviction of a capital offense to occur within the space of one day; nevertheless, Jesus was tried and condemned in just one appearance before the Sanhedrin – the Jewish supreme court.

What can we learn from this picture of the passion? It's important to remember that Jesus knows full well what it's like to be treated unjustly. Jesus even knew what it's like to be the object of official, governmental injustice and oppression. There are many people around the world – many of them followers of Jesus – who are persecuted by unjust governments. Some are imprisoned and even killed for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Few, if any of us, here today will have to face that kind of injustice in life. But, probably all of us will get treated wrongfully at different points along life's journey. You can most definitely count on that! It might be a job situation. Or you might get treated unjustly by your family or by a close friend. You will face situations where the cards are stacked against you and you will be treated in an unfair, unjustified way. Jesus knows the pain of harsh treatment. Jesus knows full well what it's like to be on the losing side of injustice. You know, it's amazing to realize how much Jesus experienced of what hurts us as human beings. That's precisely why His comfort in hard times is so healing. That's why His peace in anxious times is so real. That's why His strength in demanding times is so powerful. Available and effective.

Alanis Morissette is a secular rock singer, but she wrote a theologically interesting song a few years ago entitled "One of Us." Here's a portion of the lyrics: "If God had a name what would it be? And would you say it to His face if you were facing Him in all of His glory? What would you ask if you had one question? What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us. Just a stranger trying to make His way home." Well, Alanis, God does have a name.

It's Jesus. And He did become like one of us. And He has shown us the way home. Jesus has fully experienced what it means to be human.

### **THE DECLARATION (v. 63-68)**

The sword. The trial. Our final picture of the passion today is found within the context of Jesus' trial, but it richly deserves its own focus this morning. Here we see the craftiness and shrewdness of Caiaphas. As the court proceedings progressed, it became obvious that there just wasn't enough evidence to convict Jesus of a capital offense. The whole plot against Jesus was in danger of unraveling. The Sanhedrin was supposed to be an impartial body – kind of like a jury. It was not supposed to prosecute anyone, but when it came to Jesus, the Sanhedrin acted as both prosecutor and jury. Jesus refused to speak on his own behalf. This was entirely correct since the accused wasn't asked to incriminate himself. So Caiaphas did something unusual and illegal for a high priest. He began to interrogate and prosecute Jesus himself in a capital trial.

Caiaphas' strategy emerged quickly enough: "If we can't depend on these lousy witnesses to get their story against Jesus straight, then we'll get Him to say something self-incriminating instead." So Caiaphas demanded an answer from Jesus here on the basis of the most solemn oath known in Israel at that time – something called the Oath of the Testimony. "... 'I demand in the name of the living God—tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.'" (Mt 26:63 NLT) Demanding such an oath was brilliant. Although Jesus wasn't required to give evidence against Himself, He couldn't refuse this solemn challenge. The way Caiaphas phrased his charge was also brilliant. How so? On the one hand, if Jesus admitted to being the Messiah, that wasn't a capital offense. Claiming to be the Messiah wasn't a sufficient reason to execute someone. On the other hand, if Jesus admitted to being the Son of God, that wasn't a capital offense either. Every Jew had the right to call himself a son of God. But when Caiaphas put those two together – Messiah and Son of God – he was asking Jesus if He claimed to be a divine Messiah; in other words, a Messiah who is Himself God. When Jesus freely admitted that He was both Messiah and God in human flesh, He was immediately found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to death.

With that background in mind, let's focus on Jesus' amazing declaration. "Jesus replied, 'You have said it. And in the future you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God's right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven.'" (Mt 26:64 NLT) And then the Sanhedrin goes nuts! Why? What is that all about? Jesus accepted Caiaphas' title here – the Messiah, the Son of God – but He actually expands on it in such a way that no one in that room that night could ever have doubted what and who He was claiming to be. You might know that in his three years of public ministry, Jesus didn't go around calling Himself Messiah or Son of God. He did, however, refer to Himself as Son of Man often. Now here's something ironic but very important to understand. The title "Son of Man" actually pointed to the deity of Jesus more clearly than the title "Son of God." All

Jews considered themselves sons of God. No, they weren't claiming to be divine beings, to be sure, but they were claiming to have a special relationship with God. If Jesus had used that title for Himself, most folk would have misunderstood His real intent. Instead, Jesus preferred "Son of Man."

The Old Testament book of Daniel was written hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Jesus had read the book of Daniel. And one passage resonated with Him and He quotes a part of it in His declaration before the Sanhedrin. Daniel wrote, "As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed." (Dan 7:13-14 NLT) Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. Jesus claimed to be this eternal divine Being described here who received worship and whose kingdom is eternal. Jesus claimed divine majesty for Himself and the most exalted role imaginable in God's plan of salvation for humanity. There are some people out there – some of them very bright New Testament scholars – that scoff at the idea that Jesus ever claimed to be God. But by calling Himself the Son of Man and claiming to be the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy, that's exactly who Jesus claimed to be! Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin understood Jesus perfectly well. That's precisely why they tore their clothes and started shouting, "Blasphemy! Blasphemy!"

Please don't miss the importance of this declaration. All Jesus would have had to do was say no to Caiaphas' question. The case against Jesus would have fallen apart. But if Jesus said yes to Caiaphas' question, the cross was inevitable. Jesus looked wily, crafty, evil Caiaphas in the face and said, "Yes." The rest is history. But it's history that affects you, me and every other person who has ever or who will ever live. C.S. Lewis observed that, at the end of the day, you can only have one of three opinions about Jesus. Either Jesus was a liar who deserved what we got, or He was a lunatic who deserves your pity, or He is Lord – God in human flesh who freely chose to be nailed to a cross in order to save you and me. And if Jesus is who He clearly claimed to be – God in human flesh – and He did what the Bible says He most definitely did – die in your place and mine - then He has an eternal claim on your life. He has every right to your worship, your obedience, your life and your existence.

In his book titled The 100, astrophysicist Michael Hart asks a provocative question: Who are the 100 most influential people in history? Of all the human beings who have ever lived, who has had the deepest impact on our lives today? Hart's list includes Sigmund Freud, the originator of psychoanalysis. You may not like Freud's theories, but he opened up an entire new field of human endeavor called psychology. Hart also includes Louis Pasteur. Pasteur ushered us into the realm of modern medicine. He convinced the scientific community that these tiny, unseen things called germs caused a lot of diseases. Pasteur also figured out

how to inoculate human beings so we don't get these terrible diseases. The fact that you're here alive and well is in some measure owed to this French biologist and chemist from 150 years ago.

But what really made the book interesting and popular was that Michael Hart ranked the top one hundred world changers – kind of like the NCAA playoffs of human greatness. What do you think he did with Jesus? Sure enough, Jesus did make it onto Hart's list. He said that Jesus was the inspiration for the most influential religion in history. Hart even wrote, "Jesus had an extraordinarily impressive personality." Isn't that's a nice compliment? Hart ranked Jesus as the third most influential person in history, right after Muhammad and the scientist Isaac Newton (Incidentally, Newton was also a Christian). Hart was attempting to answer a question that every single person has to answer: What will you make of Jesus? How will you rank Jesus? Is He in your top 100? Is He in the top ten? Is He number one on your list? Or does Jesus belong to His own list—the list called Lord and Master and Savior of my life? The way you answer that question will affect everything about your life. It's the critical question of your life.

Look with me again at the cross. That's the central picture of the passion. The picture above all pictures. Where do you stand, my friend? Have you decided if Jesus is a liar, a lunatic or the Lord? "Rick, I just don't know. I need more time." My friend, you cannot remain neutral about Jesus. Either you love Him or you hate Him even if it's all dressed up in a kind of false respect for Him. Either you accept the salvation He offers or you keep trying to save yourself. Either you submit to His Lordship or you reject His claim on your life. We looked at Jesus' trial today. But the fact is that every human being is really on trial before Jesus. How do you explain that – the cross? What will you do with Jesus? Where do you stand?