

On Trial

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[0:00] In January of 1950, a 25-year-old Welshman called Timothy Evans stood in the dock of the Old Bailey in London.

! He was accused of killing his wife, Beryl, and his infant daughter.! To testify against Evans, his downstairs neighbour, a man called John Christie, stepped into the witness box and told the court of Timothy's intemperate behaviour, before recalling that he and his wife had heard a loud thud upstairs on the night of the murder.

Timothy Evans was duly declared guilty. He was sentenced to death.

And two months later, he was hanged for his crime. Except it wasn't his crime.

Because three years later, John Christie, that same downstairs neighbour who had testified against Timothy Evans and ensured that he was sentenced to death, confessed that it was in fact him who had killed Beryl Evans.

[1:36] Timothy lost his wife and daughter and was then hanged for their murder because of the false testimony of the man who had actually killed them.

Timothy Evans. Timothy Evans. Timothy Evans. I hope that makes your stomach churn. Timothy Evans. It's very rare I would start a sermon with such a sombre story.

But I do it because the way that you are feeling right now is something, but only something, that's a common sense of how we should be feeling about what we've just read.

We have had recent cases of miscarriages of justice, haven't we? I think that the Horizon Post-Selfler scandal or the case of Andrew Malkinson, but the kind of miscarriage of justice we are coming to this evening is of another order entirely.

And as solemn and horrifying as the fate of Timothy Evans is, it gets us much closer to what is going on in these chapters.

[2:56] Because just like that case, here we have an innocent man being condemned to death for allegedly committing a capital crime.

When in fact it is those who are testifying against him that stand guilty of that very crime. And as hard as it might be for us to fathom, what is happening here is worse.

Because the condemned man before us this evening was not just innocent of this one crime, he was innocent of everything. The courtroom scene is set for us in the first couple of verses we read there.

It's the middle of the night, and Jesus has been arrested by an armed mob. He is dragged into the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest, in order to be put on trial.

But on this night, there is more than one trial happening. Because out in the courtyard, one of Jesus' disciples is hidden amongst the crowd. Jesus and Peter are within a stone's throw of each other.

[4:22] And over the next few verses, both of them are going to be put on trial. And have the same life or death question put before them. Who are you?

Two trials. One question. Let's begin with a trial happening inside the high priest's palace. Where we see the sinless son of God.

Declare his kingship in order to lose his life. But before this trial begins, we've already been told how it's going to go. Because at the start of chapter 26, the prosecutors had already met in the courtroom to predetermine the outcome of the case.

To arrest Jesus by stealth and put him to death. Step one has been completed in Gethsemane. Now they are putting step two into action.

We should not be expecting a fair trial. This court is only interested in one thing, and that is a death sentence. What is remarkable, though, is how much difficulty they have.

[5:38] Even in this kangaroo court to find anything to pin on Jesus. If you're at all familiar with the Gospels, you will know this man is innocent.

He has proven himself guiltless. Literally without faults. We should already have a sense of the gross injustice here.

Here is the man who has shown himself to be loving and compassionate. Just and gentle. Patient and humble. Not just for a moment, but to everyone all the time.

And if you've not been around, or you're not sure that's really the case, just look there at verse 60. These men were doing all that they could to find some kind of dirt on Jesus.

They were ready to accept false testimonies. They were looking for unreliable witnesses. But even then, they could not find a reason to condemn him. Think about that.

[6:50] How far would someone have to go digging into your own life before some kind of imperfection came bubbling up to the surface? But even amongst a crowd of false witnesses, desperate to find some charge to lay against Jesus, nothing would stick.

Utterly innocent. Eventually, two false witnesses come forward with the same story. It's not really much to go on, but it's at least some corroboration.

Verse 61, this man said, I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.

Desecrating a place of worship was a capital offense in the Roman Empire.

Right, Caiaphas now has something to go on. Maybe a chance to trip Jesus up. What do you say to these charges?

Jesus posed no physical threat to Jerusalem's temple. He was speaking about himself, the place on earth where God had come to dwell with his people. Neither are those words a statement of intent, but of ability.

[8:05] I am able to do this. Jesus has numerous lines of legitimate defense to go down, but what does he do? Verse 63. What does he do?

He remains silent. How do you react? How do I react? When someone accuses us of something we didn't do.

When someone paints us in an unjustly bad light. When you are innocent and you know you are guilty, what do you do when people start to treat you as if you were guilty?

There are a few other things that get so under our skin, are there? But in the face of false accusation, Jesus does not say a word.

When a defense might save him, he says nothing. When silence might save him, then he opens his mouth.

[9:17] I think there's an element of exasperation in Caiaphas' plea in verse 63, that they're running out of ideas. I adjure you by the living God. Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus hasn't said a word all night.

He doesn't need to hear, and yet now he responds. He's not to save his life, but to lose it. We've seen throughout this passion narrative how Jesus has remained in complete control.

There are others who think they are kind of pulling the strings, but Jesus knows everyone's every move. He could have escaped long ago if he wanted to, but from the very beginning of Matthew's gospel, he has been on a mission, not to save himself, but to save his people from their sin.

And he knows that in order to do that, even though he is innocent, completely and utterly innocent, these men must condemn him to death.

And so he speaks, not only to affirm that he is the Messiah, but to declare himself as king. You have said so.

[10:38] I tell you, he says, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. It is a claim of divinity, of absolute authority.

Silence might well have set him free, but he says enough to ensure that he would be condemned by this court and before the Roman governor in a few verses' time.

And that is exactly what happens. Blasphemy is the charge. Death is the sentence.

And in the next few verses, the irony spills over in bucket loads. God's high priest condemns God's Son.

The chief priests commit blasphemy by accusing Jesus of blasphemy. They are committing the capital crime.

[11:45] The only innocent man in history is declared to be deserving of death. Those who pretend to be just judges are those who have conspired to murder.

The promised prophet is mockingly commanded to prophesy, having spent years prophesying about this very moment. Can you see the gravity of the sin that is packed into these few verses? However we felt about Timothy Evans and John Christie, we should be feeling it all and even more here.

These men did everything they could to ensure a man they knew was innocent suffered the most agonizing death.

They hated him. They humiliated him. They vilified him in the presence of his own people that he had come to save.

[12:52] The truly innocent Son of God who had come to save them. And this is how they treated him. Shoved into the stand to be declared deserving of death.

It's important we see the depths of wickedness on display here. But it's also important that we don't let that blind us to the fact that it is still in Jesus' hands.

Just look at verse 65. See how it is Jesus' own words. The false witnesses weren't working. It is Jesus' choice to break his silence which enables the court to declare him guilty.

He is choosing to take this path in order to save his people from their sins. He willingly went through the gravest injustice there has ever been.

He underwent the treachery of his own high priest. Questioning him and pronouncing him guilty. He silently stood there as he was beaten. As his face was spat on again and again.

[14:15] Surrounded by a crowd praying for his blood. The innocent son of God declared that he was king so that this would happen.

So that they would gleefully cry out, he deserves death. That is what is happening in courtroom number one.

Outside in courtroom number two, another individual has been questioned about his identity. But instead of declaring who he is in order to save others, this defendant denies his king in order to save himself.

Our second point this evening, the most dedicated disciple denies his king in order to save his life. Peter, I think understandably, he gets a bad rep, doesn't he?

For what happens in the lead up to Jesus' death. A couple of weeks ago, we heard Jesus tell Peter that he would deny him three times, but Peter was having none of it. Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.

[15:37] Hindsight's a wonderful thing, isn't it? And so it's very easy for us to see how foolish Peter was. But let me just remind you of the next sentence after Peter's bold promise earlier in this chapter.

Verse 35, And all the disciples said the same. It's not just Peter, is it? It is every one of Jesus' disciples who have an inflated view of their own faithfulness.

Things very quickly go very wrong. In the middle of that same night, Jesus is arrested by an armed mob. And so what happens, verse 56? Then all the disciples left him and fled.

Every disciple says they're ready to die for Jesus. Every disciple flees at the first sight of danger. By verse 58, there is only one still following Jesus.

Peter. Peter. He is the last disciple standing. And as he enters the courtyard of the high priest's palace, he's not stepping into the spectator's gallery of the Old Bailey.

[17:01] I think we can sometimes, can't we, read this narrative as if Peter was just kind of milling about Union Square on a Saturday and someone came and asked him if he was a Christian and he said no. And we kind of tut-tut, silly old Peter.

That is not what is going on here. Who do you think is gathered in the courtyard of the high priest at three o'clock in the morning? It's not people milling around the market, is it?

We know servants of the high priest are there. We know the guards are there. It's almost certainly the same mob that just arrested Jesus. Of all Jesus followers, right here is the most dedicated. The one who in the middle of the night followed the armed mob that had just arrested Jesus. The one who willingly went into the heart of enemy territory because he was not ready to completely abandon Jesus unlike every other disciple.

I think the fact is that he is there. The fact that he is there proves that he is as good as it gets.

[18:16] And that is why what happens in this trial is so crushing. It's so damning because it's not silly old people around there.

It's the most dedicated disciple up here and yet. What it says about Peter, it says much more for every other disciple of Jesus.

We've seen plenty of contrasts since we resumed this series. We have more here. While Jesus is being questioned by the high priest, it is a servant girl who comes up to Peter.

Both of them want to know the identity of the one they're speaking to. But while Jesus is declaring who he is in order to sacrifice himself, Peter is simultaneously denying who he is in order to save his own skin.

While Jesus stays silent in the face of false testimony, Peter is making a desperate defense in response to a true testimony.

[19:27] The first servant go, you are with Jesus. Peter, I don't know what you're talking about. Second witness, this man was with Jesus. Peter takes an oath upon himself, I don't know the man.

Then a whole group of witnesses, certainly you two are one of them. Your accent betrays you. But by this point, the case is watertight. There is evidence in his accents, there is an abundance of corroborating witness statements, but Peter, the most dedicated disciple, plunges himself ever deeper.

From a plea of ignorance to an oath to the invocation of a curse on himself, Peter doubles down, he triples down and refuses to acknowledge his king, all so that he could save himself.

In the presence of danger, the most dedicated disciple defaults into self-preservation mode. It's a painful contrast, isn't it?

But in his desperation to appear innocent before people, Peter declares himself guilty before God.

[20:44] And this is the one who followed Jesus the furthest. Even he denies his king. It is treason.

Now we could, can we push into the detail here and think about the ways we might, like Peter, have denied Jesus his kingship over our lives, publicly or privately.

That wouldn't be unhelpful, but I just want to take a little step back for a moment and think about the slightly bigger picture here. Because it's not, is it just, that Peter denied Jesus in the courtyard?

That the second trial proves that Peter and therefore all the disciples not only denied their king, but grossly overestimated their faithfulness to him.

And that is a warning, isn't it, to those of us who would look at Peter and think, that wouldn't be me. Jesus had said this would happen. The disciples said it would not.

[21:51] who was right. They put more faith in their ability than in Jesus' word. What God, through his son, told them was true, they rejected because they thought were not that bad.

But they were. Every one of them. We're not going to fail you that badly, Jesus. But they did.

Every one of them. Every one of us. We are that bad. In our own lives, that might look like a public denial of Jesus, but it could be any number of other things.

Any sin that rejects his rule. Any sin that serves ourselves instead of our Lord. Anything that disbelieves his word. If this is the most dedicated disciple, then the point is that every one of us stand guilty.

There is only one who is innocent. And it is none of Jesus' disciples. While Jesus is falsely condemned before Caiaphas without evidence, we stand justly condemned before God.

[23:18] And there is plenty of evidence, isn't there? You know that. In your own heart. In your own life.

So what can we do? If we all find ourselves declared guilty, not by a corrupt priest, but by a just judge, if we are all guilty, how can we be cleared?

The rest of our passage this evening offers us three avenues of escape that we might choose. What we'll see as we go is that only one of those paths leads to the freedom we so desperately crave. Remember, no one here is innocent except for Jesus. Everyone bears guilt. Peter has denied his king. Judas has betrayed his savior.

The chief priests have condemned their Messiah. Greater and lesser crimes have been committed, but lawlessness is lawlessness. And before a just judge, everyone who has committed a crime will be declared guilty.

[24:24] The sentence might differ. The verdict does not. So no one, none of these people and none of us are set apart by our innocence. No one is set apart by their innocence.

What sets people apart is what they do with their guilt. So how can the guilty be saved? First of all, not through self-recompense.

we cannot pay the price ourselves that our guilt has incurred. But that's exactly what we see Judas try and do.

When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned in verse 3, he changed his mind. He changed his mind. He wanted to rewind.

He wants to go back and have another go. And so he goes back with the 30 pieces of silver that he's just sold Jesus for.

[25:30] But even with a receipt, the chief priests are not accepting returns. So, verse 5, throwing down the pieces of silver, he departed and went and hanged himself.

It's pretty solemn, isn't it? Joe spoke a couple of weeks ago about the wickedness and the foolishness of betraying Jesus.

Here we see the tragedy, the consequences of that choice in uncomfortable clarity. Here was a man who had publicly followed Jesus, but had never put his trust in him personally.

Here was a man who had, for years, sat under Jesus' teaching, but had never taken the message to heart. To the watching world, Judas looked like a follower of Jesus, but when faced with the reality of his own guilt, he did not turn to Jesus because he never truly trusted in Jesus.

And because he never truly trusted in Jesus, he turned to himself to deal with his guilt. I'll suffer for what I have done wrong in the hope that that will right my wrongs.

[27:03] But that is not how justice works, is it? To pay off a debt, you need to restore what was taken. Judas' crime against himself does nothing to restore what he has taken from Jesus.

He is guilty of the highest treason, that there is nothing that he has that can undo the damage of what he has done. Trying to deal with your own guilt before God is like taking a rubber and doing everything you can to erase the stain of a permanent marker with it.

you can rub and rub and rub and rub, you can give it everything you've got but no matter how much you try to remove it, it won't shift until eventually the stain will remain but the rubber will be gone.

Judas does everything he can even to the point of taking his own life but the stain is still there. still there. you might rightly feel an overwhelming sense of guilt that's something you've done in the past.

Causing yourself to suffer will never undo what you have done before God. Making yourself miserable it might feel like you are paying some kind of cost but the somber reality is by trying to take the punishment himself Judas has worsened his guilt before God.

[28:49] Now he has the blood of two individuals on his hands. Judas has committed the most grievous crime that does not give him the right to take away the life that God had given him.

Now he is guilty of destroying two lives and he will have to give an account for both of them.

Causing yourself to suffer does not make you right before God.

The painful but important truth is that it will not undo your guilt it will further it. We cannot undo what we've done nor can we cover up what we've done.

We can't be saved through self recompense secondly neither can we be saved through self righteousness. Just look there at verse 6 with me the chief priest taking the pieces of silver said it is not lawful to put them into the treasury since it is blood money.

Do you see what they're saying? It's staggering when you think about it. Just look back to verse 59 of chapter 26 with me. I'm sure most of us are relatively familiar with the Ten Commandments.

[30:05] Sixth Commandment we looked at this a couple of weeks ago you shall not murder. Ninth Commandment you shall not bear false witness.

Verse 59 of chapter 26 the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death.

Back to verse 6 of chapter 27 the chief priests pick up Judas' money look at one another and say with a straight face better make sure to keep the law.

It's barely believable and yet it's very believable. Trying to cover up the greatest sin with the smallest acts of righteousness.

The chief priests know it as blood money they know exactly what they have used it for but now they are trying to cover up their guilt with a little bit of innocence hoping that the good might somehow outweigh the bad but just as you can't undo guilt neither can you cover it up and like Judas their attempt to escape their guilt through their own actions brings more guilt on their shoulders.

Their attempt at self-righteousness spying a potter's field as a burial place for strangers turns out to be a fulfillment of a kind of host of Old Testament prophecies each of which together anticipate the future judgment of Jerusalem's religious leaders because of their attempts to rid themselves of the one whom God had sent to be their shepherd.

[31:44] In trying to live by God's word in trying to justify themselves by his law they bring themselves under its judgments!

declared innocent because of what they have done but what they have done is exactly why they'll be declared guilty. Again, every one of us here this evening knows that there is wrong we have done.

Really, none of us know just how much wrong we have done because our greatest sin is against God and his king and we are often blind to it but even if we convince ourselves that our sin is shallow there is no amount of righteousness that can cover up our guilt.

But we know that don't we in our own justice system. If a person is guilty of a crime no amount of good deeds in someone's life will change the verdict from guilty to not guilty. That's not how it works, is it?

what is done is done and there is no covering it up with good deeds. You might be able to hide your guilt from others, you might even be able to hide it from yourself.

[33:32] There is no hiding it from God. He sees what you are, he knows what you've done. We cannot undo it, we cannot cover it up.

So how can we be cleared of our guilt thirdly and finally? We can only be saved by coming to the condemned king.

While Judas and the chief priests are trying to remove their guilt from themselves, Jesus is taking on the guilt of others, taking it on his own shoulders, brought before Pilate, the Roman governor, Jesus once again makes no defense and only speaks to ensure that although innocent, he will be condemned.

Condemned so that he can take the guilt of those who come to him. We'll think about this in much more detail next week, but we don't have to wait seven days to hear the good news of the gospel. What Jesus is doing here is stepping into the dock so that we don't have to, being declared deserving of death so that those who are united to him by faith can have the penalty paid by him.

[34:57] The guilt removed, the conscience cleansed completely and utterly so that before the throne of God we really do stand innocent, cleansed from every stain of sin.

He puts himself forward to pay our debt, to carry our burden, to die for our iniquities and he is choosing to do it for us.

knowing the depths of our sin even better than we do. It's an amazing thought, isn't it, that Jesus knows what Peter is doing in the courtyard outside the palace.

That as he is being questioned, he knows Peter is being questioned. That as he is being spat on, he knows Peter is denying him.

While he is being beaten and mocked, Peter is taking an oath upon himself that says, I never knew him. Jesus knows it all and yet he chooses to lose his life for Peter and for every one of his disciples who have failed him, who have fled from him, who have denied him, but have in the end still come

to him, even at the last, not in strength, but in sin, knowing that it is only in Jesus that our guilt can be dealt with.

[36:51] Only in him can we be saved, and we are saved, guilty. Because the innocent chose to be declared guilty, we who are guilty can be declared innocent, but only when we come to him.

so please do that. Whoever you are here this evening, if you have not put your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, you know there is guilt in your life that has not been dealt with.

Let me say to you, you cannot deal with it yourself. you cannot undo it, you cannot run from it, you cannot cover it up, but by coming to Jesus, it will all be dealt with.

Every single stain of sin wiped clean by the precious blood of the king who gave up his life for the sake of sinners.

And if you have done that, if you have come to him, praise him. It's as simple as that.

[38:25] Praise him for who he is. Praise him for what he has done. Praise the Lord who laid down his life for your sake. Praise the condemned king who knows the depths of your sin, but still went through the greatest injustice there has ever been to make you clean.

Praise him as the only one who can clear the guilty, the only one who can make us clean, the one who declared himself to be king in order to lose his life that we might gain life in him forever.

Let us praise him as we pray to him and then praise him as we sing our song together. Let us Lord, we come and confess that we are guilty.

We are guilty before you, should we stand on our own merit. Lord, we know we have done much which is wrong before you.

And yet, Lord, for those of us here this evening with our faith and hope in Jesus Christ, you declare us innocent, clean, not guilty, not condemned because of Jesus Christ.

[40:12] And so we come to thank you and praise you for him, for the king of all creation, who came and silently suffered for our sake, who endured the greatest injustice, who was mocked and beaten and spat on, who was betrayed by his very own.

We thank you and praise you for him, that he went through it all, that we might be saved from our sin. So help us now to live lives that are worthy of the gospel that you have called us to.

And above all else, to praise the name of Jesus, for his is far greater than every other name. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Amen.