

Date:

The crucifixion of Jesus

PRAY Living God, I ask you to give me a clearer understanding of Jesus as ‘the Christ, the Son of God’ as I read and pray today.

READ Matthew 26:57–68

REFLECT

As a young man, I got a ticket for jumping a red light. Because I believed the light was amber, I decided to appeal in court. As I waited my turn to stand before the magistrate, I watched as one by one other defendants lost their appeal. They were led away to pay their fines on the spot. I suddenly panicked; there was no money in my wallet. I was at the mercy of the court.

In our passage today, Jesus was at the mercy of this Sanhedrin court – only the stakes were much, much higher. Not only that, Caiaphas and his cronies were breaking all the rules of due process. First, the trial took place at night instead of during the day. Second, the charges were based on false evidence (26:59) and false witnesses (26:60). But the greatest flaw was that the judge and jury had already made up their minds; they were looking for an excuse to execute Jesus (26:59).

The sad truth is, when a person makes up their mind to reject Jesus, no amount of evidence will cause them to change. Ultimately, accepting Jesus involves both a change of mind and a change of heart.

But what exactly caused Caiaphas and the teachers of the Law to act more like a gang of thugs than the respected leaders that they were?

Jesus had shown disrespect for the Temple (26:61,62). That’s what the religious leaders thought, and it’s a chilling reminder not to let our religious institutions become more important than following Jesus.

Jesus claimed to be the Son of God (26:63,65). Caiaphas rightly identified that as the central issue. He was unwilling to accept Jesus on that basis – and that’s the biggest mistake anyone can ever make.

I’m glad to say that when I stood in the court years ago the magistrate accepted my side of the story and let me go. I left the courtroom relieved and happy. But that pales into insignificance compared to the joy I feel knowing that Jesus willingly accepted the unfair verdict of this kangaroo court so that he could pay the debt of sin for you and me.

APPLY Have you ever had a change of heart and mind about Jesus? When and why?

PRAY Pray for one person you know who’s decided not to believe in Jesus.

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PRAY ‘Our God, you bless everyone whose sins you forgive and wipe away. You bless them by saying, “You told me your sins, without trying to hide them, and now I forgive you”’ (Psalm 32:1,2, CEV).

READ Matthew 26:69 – 27:10

REFLECT

When I was in high school I had a good friend who was Jewish. His house contained symbols of his family’s active participation in Judaism; sometimes he’d even try to teach me Hebrew phrases. One day he was visiting my house and saw symbols of our family’s active participation in the Christian faith and said, ‘You think the Messiah has come, but we’re still waiting for him.’ Instead of telling him about Jesus, I replied rather weakly, ‘Well, that’s where our two religions differ.’ To this day I regret the lost opportunity; it felt to me almost like a denial of Jesus.

That’s why this account of Peter’s famous denial always gets to me; I’ve done it too. I’m particularly sobered by the progression of Peter’s failure. His first denial is that of a double agent (26:70); perhaps he said it just to stay inside the enemy’s camp. Then, in the face of mounting pressure, he denies Jesus with greater emphasis (26:72); it’s becoming easier. When Peter is cornered and forced to declare where he stands with Jesus, he erupts with a final, angry denial (26:74); it’s as if he’d been practising for this moment all night long.

The good news, as we’ll see in a future reading, is that Jesus used this courtyard debacle to strengthen Peter’s faith and empower him for a new future of productive ministry (John 21:15–19). If we are willing to repent of denying Jesus and sinning against him, no failure is so great that it can separate us from God or keep us from serving him.

Tragically, Judas never understood that. Although he felt deep remorse (27:3), he never came to the place of repenting. But the fact is, there was hope for him even at this final hour. Like the thief on the cross, Judas could have called out to Jesus (Luke 23:39–43) and been forgiven. Ironically, there was less hope for the chief priest and elders whose unbelievable hypocrisy and arrogance (27:4–10) sealed their fate.

APPLY What are some ways you have denied Jesus? What are some ways you could stand up for him?

PRAY Ask God to forgive you for any ways you have denied him and ask him for the courage to stand up for Jesus at the next opportunity.