

# 18

## The Trials of God and Men



### John Chapter 18

Celebrity trials grab our attention and the world's media. Even those of us not interested in Michael Jackson's music were curious about the result of his trial. People who had never heard of O. J. Simpson were gripped by the courtroom scenes. Whatever country or culture you are from, you will find high-profile legal cases selling newspapers and occupying the media's attention. I check out the BBC's Web site every day for news that interests me and there is, without fail, at least one headline involving a famous person and a court case.

But we are talking a whole different league with Jesus. No trial in human history has received as much attention as his. More has been written about it than any other. During the actual trial there were few that realized it was going on and perhaps none other than Jesus himself who understood its significance. But it turned out to be the most colossal case of injustice ever known. God had a plan, however, and he turned what was a tragic travesty into a total triumph. Let us spend some time today looking at the events and characters involved in this mega-trial.

#### **Divine 'Docudrama'**

This chapter plays out like a docudrama. Bear in mind that John was writing to people who probably already knew the story of what had happened to Jesus. He is not just relating facts but getting a

point across. How does he do this? He switches the focus from character to character and location to location—I love the way John builds the tension. As we delve into this chapter I suggest you keep asking yourself, “So, what is the point John is trying to convey?”

I have no pithy stories or anecdotes to illustrate this chapter. I would like instead to invite you to enter the world of the text. Take the part of an “extra” in the docudrama; place yourself in the olive grove, at the door to the courtyard, in the house of the high priest, standing by the fire, outside Pilate’s palace. What do you see, hear, and feel? Most importantly, what is it like to see what Jesus does and hear what he says? Aren’t you drawn to the quiet dignity of this great, suffering, servant-king? Do you sense his security and godly confidence? And how about the characters surrounding Jesus? We are all in this chapter—somewhere or other—just look carefully in the shadows and you will see yourself.

John starts in the dark of the olive grove and introduces us to Judas guiding the soldiers. I can imagine them creeping through the undergrowth trying not to step on twigs. The scene becomes even more vivid as he mentions the torches, lanterns and weapons (v3). The drama increases as people fall to the ground (v6) and Peter swings his sword (v10). Jesus is shown in control as he “went out and asked them, ‘Who do you want?’” (v4). Here is no cowering religious wimp. Jesus is strong, yet meek; courageous, yet humble as he steps forward to embrace his destiny: “Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” (v11).

Soldiers then bound Jesus and took him to Annas, which is interesting in itself.<sup>1</sup> Have you noticed how the focus switches back and forth between different people and places? We go from the garden, to Annas, to Peter, back to Annas, back again to Peter and finally to Pilate. What is going on here? I can just see the first-century paparazzi trying to keep up.

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1. Annas had been high priest, but the Romans deposed him in 15 AD. They installed his son-in-law, Caiaphas, instead, and he ruled from 18 AD–36 AD. So why was Jesus taken to Annas before Caiaphas? Most likely Annas still retained a great deal of influence and power. Perhaps he was seen by some as still being the “legitimate” high priest. As a matter of protocol Jesus is taken before Annas first in deference to his continuing power and stature. The other three Gospels tell us about the trial before Caiaphas which John omits here.

## Contrasting Characters

John is showing us the dignity and legitimacy of Jesus in contrast to the indignity and illegitimacy of the behavior of those around him. Let me illustrate: Judas, the soldiers, the officials from the chief priests and Pharisees were creeping around in the dark—Jesus stepped forward to confront them. By his actions he was confronting their duplicity, for if they had had a legitimate case with which to arrest him, they should have done it in daylight in the city or at the temple. Why did they not do so? Because they did not have a good enough case.

Annas might have been seen as the legitimate high priest, but he did not deal with Jesus “legitimately.” Neither did Pilate. Annas and Pilate did not conduct their trials legally. Annas as high priest asked questions about his disciples and teaching (v19), but according to the law he should first have presented witnesses to establish the accused person’s guilt. Jesus was smacked in the face (v22) before anyone had produced actual testimony of his wrongdoing. What must Jesus have been feeling when asked, “Is this the way you answer the high priest?” (v22), knowing he himself was our “great high priest” (Hebrews 4:14). Indeed, he is a “merciful and faithful high priest in service to God” (Hebrews 2:17) in contrast to Annas who was neither merciful to him nor faithful to his God-given duty.

Annas was conducting this trial of Jesus in contradiction to the law *and* not recognizing the Lamb of God who had come “that he might take away our sins” (1 John 3:5, also John 1:29). If there was anyone in Jerusalem or perhaps on the entire planet who ought to have realized what was going on and the true identity and significance of Jesus, it was Annas as high priest. How tragic that the earthly, temporary high priest did not have his eyes open to the heavenly, permanent high priest.

Pilate fared no better. He did not bring actual charges against Jesus (v29). The Jews merely called him a criminal and asked to have him executed (vv30–31). Pilate said three times there was no basis for a charge against Jesus (v38; 19:4, 6; see also Luke 23:4, 14, 22).

No witnesses were ever produced, Jesus never actually stood trial, and the verdict in the case was obviously based on political convenience and not on factual evidence.

Irony is everywhere in these verses. Barabbas' name means "son of the father" (in Aramaic). He was the guilty man of violence who was released while Jesus, the true "Son of the Father" and the only innocent man on the earth, was condemned. Again, the contrast with Jesus is remarkable. Pilate was a ruler, but only as one under the ultimate authority of Caesar. As such he ought to have upheld law and justice. Jesus was a king (v37) and yet was under the ultimate authority of his Father while on this earth (John 5:19, 15:10). He did uphold his Father's will, even though it was about to cost him his life. He stood for justice for all people while a great injustice was being perpetrated upon him. He was willing to pay the ultimate price, while Pilate was displaying his true colors as a ruler of expediency.

But I have left someone out. This someone is terribly important.

### **Peter the Petrified**

Annas was confused by religious pride and Pilate by political fears, but what about Peter? Ah, Peter—he is you and me. Let's face it, while I can be Annas and Pilate in different ways, it is Peter I relate to most easily. Yes, even the Peter in the garden lopping off the man's ear with a sword. What? Me, mild-mannered Malcolm? Yes, me, you and the rest of humankind! We are all capable of violence.

"No, not me!" I hear you cry. Are you sure? Given the right (or wrong) conditions and the right (or wrong) buttons being pressed, we all have our explosion point where loss of control is guaranteed. Righteous indignation and fits of rage can look remarkably similar. Some of us lose it frequently and publicly (Peter's pattern) while some of us lose it rarely and privately. Just a thought for the natural Peters among us: Are you known as a person of self-control or do people reach for fire extinguishers when you open your mouth? (See James 3:5–6.)

And what of Peter at the door to the courtyard warming himself

by the fire? It is not a huge distance from warrior to weakest link. The contrast with Jesus is, again, stark. Jesus was in control in Gethsemane, while Peter was out of control. Jesus was dignified and restrained, while Peter was impetuous. Under arrest Jesus confronted his accusers with truth (vv20ff), while Peter sought to retain his freedom by avoiding telling the truth to his inquisitors. Jesus was testifying to the truth; Peter was running from the truth. Jesus challenged his accusers to specify if he had told lies (v23); Peter told lies to protect himself. What does it take to get you to compromise your Christian beliefs or ethics? Our friend Pete had forgotten what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10–12)

Of course we know that Peter changed, but we are getting ahead of ourselves. That will have to wait until chapter 21. For now, perhaps this is a time to reflect on what conditions tempt us to compromise. Is it pressure from a boss at work? Can you resist family force? Are you easily bullied by neighbors?

We see a succession of characters contrasted with Jesus. We can learn several lessons about ourselves from Peter, Judas, Annas and Pilate. The *main* thing however, is to see them in sharp contrast to Jesus. In this chapter he is the most humble, most righteous, most obedient and, somehow, most free and secure. He is the only one in the entire chapter at peace—yet he has the most to lose. What an irony and what an example for us to follow! The way to security and freedom is not in insisting on our rights or retaining control over our destiny, but in having the faithful courage to surrender to God’s will

and follow the model of Jesus Christ. Who is *really* on trial here? Is it Jesus? Or is it Judas (those who betray), Peter (those who follow but fail), Annas (the religious establishment) or Pilate (the political authorities)?

Here is the question: who are you like right now? Who do you *want* to be like today? Do you want to be like Judas who did what was right so long as Jesus matched his agenda? Do you want to imitate Pilate who does what is right so long as his career isn't compromised? Do you want to be like Annas who is prepared to be religious so long as no one challenges his interpretation? Do you want to be like Peter who is courageous as long as it is about swords and not about loyalties? I know there is a lot of Judas, Peter, Pilate and Annas in me. Judas twisted the point. Annas missed the point. Pilate ignored the point. Peter forgot the point. *We mustn't twist it, miss it, ignore it or forget it.*

What is the point? It is all about Jesus. This docudrama is about Jesus. Our faith is about Jesus. The gospel and the cross are about Jesus. Our lives are about Jesus. Never forget this.

### Questions for Reflection

1. Who do you identify with most in this chapter? Why?
2. What do you think you would have done in Peter's sandals?
3. Do you think I've got the right emphasis in this chapter? Is it possible John's point is less about Jesus (he doesn't speak all that much, in fact) and more about the "supporting" characters?

### Prayer

Father, thank you for the dignity, strength and spiritual courage of Jesus. Help me to see whether I'm more like Judas, Annas, Peter or Pilate. I want to be more like Jesus, but I feel much more like the other characters in this chapter. Help me, Father, to learn and grow. Give me strength to drink my cup, speak the truth and not shrink from persecution that comes from righteous living. In Jesus' name, Amen.