JESUS BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

Matthew 26:57–75

Key Verse: 26:64

“‘You have said so,’ Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’”

 Have you ever felt ready for something? Really *prepared*? Have you ever felt you were really *not* ready? There are many things in life we need to be ready for—ready for a test, ready for a new start, ready for a challenge or for a new baby. Then there’s also being spiritually ready. In today’s passage Matthew mainly shows us a contrast between Jesus, who was spiritually ready, and Peter who was not. What made the difference? What should we learn from this? May God open our hearts and help us learn from this study how to be spiritually ready in any situation.

 The contrast starts in verses 57,58. Jesus is taken before the religious leaders; Peter is outside, mingling with the guards to see the outcome. What stands out is that Peter is trying to follow Jesus “at a distance.” It’s not just about spatial difference; Peter is trying to play it safe. He wants to follow Jesus. He wants to keep his promises to him. At the same time, it seems too risky, and he wants to save himself. So many so-called Christians try to follow Jesus at a safe distance: not too much sacrifice, not too much commitment, not too much suffering. Unfortunately, when our focus is on self-preservation, we can’t be spiritually ready.

 Look at verses 59,60a. This is a trial in the middle of the night. They’ve all gathered because they want to execute Jesus before sundown on Friday, when the Sabbath begins. It’s less than 24 hours away, so they’re in a hurry. They’re supposed to follow basic laws in convicting someone. The principle is: innocent until proven guilty. There has to be evidence, facts and eyewitnesses. But the religious leaders aren’t looking for the truth; they just want to carry out their own agenda. They quickly call in all kinds of people to tell their stories about Jesus. But it’s not working. The peoples’ stories don’t match. So the leaders couldn’t find anything wrong in all that Jesus did and said. If people started digging into our personal lives, some embarrassing things might come up. But not with Jesus. Jesus was a man of integrity. In both his public and private life, what he taught and what he did matched. It was because in his everyday life Jesus lived before the eyes of God.

 Look at verses 60b,61. It’s desperate, but it’s something they can work with. Two people agree, which was necessary. Plus, they have testimony that Jesus was threatening the Jerusalem temple. Just that past Sunday Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem as King. He went straight to the temple but found it full of people buying and selling and changing money. He rebuked them for turning God’s temple, a house of prayer, into a den of robbers. Then Jesus turned it into a place where the blind and the lame could be healed. Jesus loved God’s temple because it was God’s house and a place where God’s people could meet with him. He in no way was attacking the worship of God.

During that event the religious leaders became furious with Jesus, because he made their management of the temple look so bad. They asked him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (Jn2:18,19). Jesus never said *he* would destroy the temple; he challenged *them* to do it. And he wasn’t talking about the literal temple building; he was talking about his own body (Jn2:21). Through his death and resurrection Jesus became our Temple. Now we can come to the Holy God, wherever we are, through faith in Jesus our atoning sacrifice. But these false witnesses twisted his words. They said Jesus was threatening to destroy the temple. In their world, attacking a sacred place of worship was a great crime, punishable by death.

 At this point in the trial the high priest gains confidence. He says to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” (62) He’s expecting Jesus to start explaining himself. How does Jesus respond? Look at verse 63a. How hard it is to remain silent, especially when people are accusing us falsely! We’re so quick to defend ourselves, even when what people are saying about us is true! But Jesus remained silent. Why? He must have been thinking of the prophecy of Isaiah, “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 its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Isa53:7). It’s always a temptation to argue and fight with people. But Jesus was spiritually ready to resist this temptation, because he had prayed beforehand at Gethsemane to do God’s will. Prayer gave him the strength to remain silent. We think we have to speak up and speak out against injustice. But often, the best thing to do is to remain silent. And we can know what to do when we pray.

 Jesus’ silence is speaking to the high priest’s conscience. But he doesn’t want to listen to his conscience. He only gets mad. He says, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God” (63b). Obviously he’s run out of patience. But why is he asking this question? Does he really want to know the truth? No, he just wants to finish the trial quickly. But how would Jesus’ answer finish the trial? It’s because, to the high priest, if Jesus answered “yes,” it would be blasphemy. To this high priest the notion that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God, is totally ludicrous. He’s nothing but a poor country carpenter. He has no wealth, no power, no status. The high priest, on the other hand, has all kinds of wealth, power and the highest status. And he’s sure Jesus is deluded into thinking *is* the Messiah, the Son of God. Nobody ever asked Jesus directly like he did. He thinks he has Jesus trapped now.

 How does Jesus answer? Read verse 64. Jesus knows this trial is not about truth. But he tells the truth anyway: “You have said so.” Why does he answer like this? Jesus never went around claiming to be the Messiah, trying to persuade people to believe in him. He just quietly did the work the Father God gave him to do, healing the sick and giving people the word of God. He let the facts speak for themselves. Now, when the high priest asks him about his being the Messiah, the Son of God, he quietly answers, “You have said so.”

But he doesn’t stop there. He adds, “But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” It’s prophecy. Jesus is loosely quoting from the prophecy of Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13. Through his servant David God promised his Son, the Messiah, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” The prophet Daniel saw a vision of someone “like a son of man,” a human being, coming on the clouds of heaven, who would approach God, the Ancient of Days, and be led into his presence. These are predictions of the Messiah’s ultimate victory. Jesus seems so helpless before these religious leaders right now. But Jesus has faith in God. He believes God’s promises to exalt him to his own right hand. He believes God will give him victory over all his enemies and make him the Judge of the living and the dead in the end. His faith and his hope make him so strong, strong enough to endure with dignity all that he’s going to have to go through.

But what does this mean to us? It means when we follow Jesus, we get to share in his victory. When we suffer and sacrifice for him, he promises we’ll share in his glorious reign in the kingdom of God (19:28,29; cf. Ro8:17). Apostle Paul wrote the Thessalonian Christians, “Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you, and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels” (2Th1:4–7). The question is: are we enduring? Or are we escaping and running away in our hearts? We can endure like our Lord Jesus on trial when we have faith.

Read verse 64 again. We need this same conviction of faith. With this conviction of faith, we can have a living hope. With this conviction of faith, we can be inwardly strong. With this conviction of faith, we can be spiritually ready.

The high priest gets really dramatic (65,66a). Then the people there start abusing Jesus (66b–68). Their whole attitude towards him changes when they realize he’s not going to defend himself. They’re supposed to be religious leaders, but they get so violent. They think they’re getting revenge for all the rebukes Jesus has given them. But even their spitting, slapping and mocking were a fulfillment of prophecies and of Jesus’ words (20:19; cf. Isa50:6). They especially mock his identity as the Messiah. Why did Jesus have to go through this? It was for us. It was to take away all the shame and humiliation of our sins.

In the last part of today’s passage we see Peter. It’s a very sad part. Look at verse 69. It’s not an assembled body of the most powerful religious leaders; it’s just a random servant girl. But she likes to speak up. She’s hoping to get Peter in trouble. How does he respond? Look at verse 70. Just hours earlier Peter had boasted, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will,” and “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” (33,35). But as Jesus had warned him, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (41). Peter thought he could handle it, but he couldn’t handle it. He was depending on his own power, not God’s power. He was a strong man, but he totally buckled. It happened not once, but three times (71–74a). What’s striking here is Peter’s repeated words, “I don’t know the man!” As his top disciple Peter knew Jesus probably better than anyone else. But he could not but deny him when he depended on himself. All of us cannot really depend on ourselves. Why not? Because we’re all nothing but weak sinners. We can turn evil in a moment. We need to really pray not to fall into temptation.

Read verse 75. Peter had committed a sin that’s so hard to recover from. But when he remembered Jesus’ word, he could begin to repent. It was a moment of self-revelation, which he really needed. It would open up a whole new world for him, a world of depending on Jesus’ grace, not on himself. So in his tears of repentance there was hope. We learn from him how it’s possible for us stubborn sinners, who never listen, to repent. It’s not about torturing ourselves or just getting emotional. Real repentance begins when we remember Jesus’ word.

Read verse 64 again. May God make us spiritually ready to identify ourselves as Jesus’ followers and share our faith in him. May God make us spiritually strong with the same faith and hope as our Lord Jesus. And may God help us learn how to repent based on his word.