

Sermon for Sunday, March 28, 2010
Dr. Dan Doriani

THE TRIALS OF THE CHRIST
Matthew 26:47-66

Today I want to travel with you through essential moments in Jesus' last week. Join me in meditation and devotion. See who Jesus is. First, he is our friend. Proverbs says, "A friend loves at all times... a brother is born for adversity." There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Jesus is that friend. He sticks with us when we desert him. Yet he is more than a friend. He is Savior and Lord, for he died for fools and deserters like his disciples and like us. What great love – a love that should inspire our love, our worship and dedication.

Jesus endured an utterly unjust arrest, trial, and condemnation because it was necessary for him to complete his plan to redeem us. The trial calls us to love, worship and follow the Lord when we must endure for his cause.

If anything stirs outrage over injustice, it's corrupt jurors and authorities plotting to condemn an innocent man. In this, the trials of Jesus and Socrates are similar. If we compare them we see again who Jesus is, how he loves us, why we love him. In 399 B.C., five hundred men of Athens voted to execute Socrates for impiety and the corruption of youth. He was seventy years old. Socrates had fought to defend the city of Athens in three wars and taught publicly in Athens for decades. Why try and condemn him now? Two reasons: 1) Socrates kept asking difficult, embarrassing questions in the marketplace. He shamed leaders and despised common people. 2) He had the wrong political views. Athens was a democracy. But Socrates thought ordinary people could never attain the knowledge and virtue necessary to rule wisely.

At his trial Socrates never apologized, never asked for mercy. He swore that he loved Athens so much he could never stop teaching. The only way to stop him was to kill him. That is what Athens' citizens did, ordering Socrates to drink a cup of poison. Someone said that Socrates needed hemlock to complete his cause, just as Jesus needed the cross to fulfill his. But no, Socrates died because he kept teaching. His aim was never to die, it was to persuade. When that failed, Socrates chose to die rather than stop teaching.

Jesus and Socrates both taught and both were fearless, but the similarity ends there. Jesus' trial, condemnation and death were always essential to his purposes. In the gospels we see Jesus taking a path that led first to death, then to resurrection.

1. Jesus is arrested (26:47-56)

Our story begins when Jesus entered Jerusalem, with a crowd of Galileans at his back crying, "Hosanna to the Son of David" – that is, Praise God for sending his long awaited deliverer. But Jesus didn't deliver in the way the people expected. He didn't call Israel to arms or bring fire or death to the Romans. If he fought anyone, it was the corrupt leaders of Israel. The temple was supposed to be a house of prayer for the nations, but they had made it a den of thieves.

Not all the priests, but the chief priests and Saducees were collaborating with Rome. They were using their power, the prestige of the temple to get rich and keep power so Jesus judged them. He threw out the money changers and stopped the sacrifices. The powers were enraged and asked, "Who gave you the authority to do this?" They meant, "We are the authorities." The audacity of Jesus and the miracles and the popularity led them to conclude "He must die."

"Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest and... plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. But not during the Feast, they said, or there may be a riot among the people" (26:3-5). They caught a break when, for reasons we will never fully fathom, Judas

decided to betray Jesus. For something like \$10,000, he promised to lead the authorities to Jesus where they could arrest him.

Jesus knew what was coming and agonized over it in solitary prayer in a garden called Gethsemane. He asked his disciples to stay with him. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me" (26:38). And he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (26:39). The "cup" represents the wrath of God upon human sin and he sincerely wanted to avoid it. For our sake, he yielded to the Father.

So he stayed in the garden while the soldiers came to arrest him. The disciples had fallen asleep, but Jesus was ready (26:40-46). He roused them so they were awake when Judas arrived, leading soldiers and guards armed with swords and clubs and sent by the chief priests and elders (26:45-47).

Jesus is betrayed – the kiss of Judas (26:47-49)

Jesus was still very popular with the people. By arresting him in a garden, away from the crowds, the authorities avoided an uproar. The priests of Israel decided to send a number of people including temple guards and well-armed Roman soldiers.

It is night; most soldiers probably couldn't spot Jesus. Therefore "the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him"" (26:48). Judas recognized Jesus: "Greetings, Rabbi!" (polite but cool) and "kissed him" (26:49). The kiss on the cheek was a sign of affection between friends. When Judas used it to identify Jesus, it's the worst treachery.

We will never understand why Judas betrayed Jesus, but he does teach us one lesson. Whether the betrayal occurs in war, at work, in the family or here, there is a common thread. It is possible to be attached to an army or a family and never truly belong. It is even possible to be attached to Jesus without really belonging to him. I pray that is not true of any of us. But I ask you to search yourselves.

Judas traveled with Jesus, heard him teach, beheld the miracles, and ministered alongside him. Today it is possible to be a church member, teach a class or lead a ministry, and still not know Jesus. Christian service is good, but we must know Jesus, love and worship him. Otherwise activity is vain, even treacherous.

Jesus is abandoned – his disciples resist, then flee (26:50-56)

When Judas kissed Jesus, "the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him." Peter "reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear" (26:50-51, John 18:10). Several disciples thought of fighting; they had swords with them. But Jesus ordered them to stop and healed the man's ear (22:38, 49-50).

We must admire Jesus for this. At this hour, he paused to heal another man's wound. It is always his way. He came to this world to heal our wounds. We claim we can't help others because we have problems of our own. Jesus certainly had problems of his own! And yet he stopped, as we should stop.

Peter seemed willing to fight, even die, for Jesus. But Jesus told him, "Put your sword back in its place" (Matthew 26:52). Minutes later, Peter shifted from rash bravado to craven fear. Jesus is the only one who can find and hold the right course.

Jesus' power is restrained (26:53)

At every point, Jesus was in control of his arrest. He exercised unperturbed mastery of the situation. Jesus is in control of himself, his disciples, and the soldiers. This is clearest in John. There, when Judas and the soldiers came to the garden, Jesus went out to meet them and asked "Whom do you seek?" (18:3-4, English Standard Version).

They replied, "Jesus the Nazarene."

Jesus said, "I am he." The original is just two words: *ego eimi*, that is, "I am."

This prompts a question, for "I am" can mean two things. If someone knocked on the door of a friend and the friend asked, "Who is it?" the common answer (in Greek) was "I am." On the other hand, "I am" is also the name of God – Yahweh - in the Old Testament. God is the eternal, self-sufficient God, the great "I am" (Exodus 3).

What did Jesus intend – "It's me" or "I am the Lord?" The response of the soldiers shows us. When Jesus said, "I am," the soldiers "drew back and fell to the ground" (John 18:6). The power of Jesus' voice, declaring "I am" displays his deity for all to see.

But since it is "the hour," Jesus rouses them, asking "Whom do you seek?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," they reply.

"I told you that I am he," Jesus answered. "If you are looking for me, then let these men go" (18:7-8). "Let these men go" is a command. Jesus is telling the soldiers, "Here I am, arrest me, but you let my disciples go." That's what they did: they arrested Jesus and let the disciples go. So Jesus chose to lay down his life; he chose to drink the cup of suffering (John 10:18, Matthew 26:39).

Jesus went with the soldiers because he determined to do so. Peter drew his sword, but Jesus needed no weapons; if he called on the Father, he would dispatch more than twelve legions of angels (70,000 angels; 26:52-53).

Jesus also comments on the disciples' feistiness: "All who draw the sword will die by the sword" (26:52). Jesus is not advocating pacifism. He is saying the kingdom is neither advanced nor truly defended by force. The kingdom advances by the power of his truth and by the beautiful lives of God's people. Our weapons are spiritual. Christianity is at its worst when we use weapons and force. Violence begets violence, but kindness begets kindness.

Jesus stood firm

Consider how Jesus stood firm. It began, I believe, with his anguished prayer in Gethsemane. Jesus declared his distress with emotion. He did not want to endure the cross and the sins of the world. He lamented his role as the righteous sufferer. He also listened to the Father's answer. Because he said exactly what he thought, he heard the Father's answer and embraced it. That fortified him in later events. The priests plotted, Judas betrayed him, and soldiers wielded weapons, but Jesus knew - all followed the Father's will.

This shows us how to stand firm in swirling events. We don't have the power of Jesus, but we can know that events proceed according to the Father's will. This doesn't mean we are Stoics! Jesus asked for relief, even wept on occasion (Luke 22:44). We have every right to plead, lament, weep, and pour out our soul before God.

But when we finish and we hear God's will, we stand firm because we know the Father's will. When work is misery and will not improve; when a vital relationship falls apart; when illness strikes and the prospects of recovery are dim; when the desire for marriage is strong but the prospects slim; when a long-nurtured proposal is struck down; when we want to serve, but we never get the chance, then pour out your lament. Tell the Lord. But listen for his reply and stand firm in his plan.

When I was 28, just after I finished graduate school, I took a call to revitalize a struggling church plant in a small town located in a county with 80,000 residents. A month after I arrived, the area's largest employer - a textile plant that had employed thousands - closed its doors forever. A month later another manufacturer announced major layoffs. Unemployment reached 20%; a great exodus began. Within twelve months, almost 40% of our church moved to another state. How can anyone revitalize a church in that environment? But I stayed, and the church recovered and grew because we knew the Lord had called us to that place.

Because Jesus knew that his Father has a plan, he endured. The same confidence will grant us courage to endure, too.

The plan fulfilled (26:54-56)

Jesus had never resorted to force, so there was no need to "come out with swords and clubs to capture" him. "Every day," he said, "I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me" (26:55).

Jesus didn't resist because he knew he had to fulfill the plan of redemption. He cited Zechariah: "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep... will be scattered'" (26:31). For the disciples said they were willing to die with Jesus, but when the soldiers arrived, "All the disciples deserted [Jesus] and fled" as the prophets had said (26:35, 56, Zechariah 13:7). Jesus sees the divine design. His betrayal and arrest fulfill Scriptures, which "say it must happen this way" (26:54).

2. Jesus on trial (26:57-66)

The goal of the Jewish leaders (26:57-58)

The Jewish leaders sought Jesus' death, nothing less. But first they had to convict him of a capital offense. Since the Roman governor reserved the right of execution to himself, at least in Judea, they had to find Jesus guilty of a capital crime in both Jewish and Roman law.

But Jesus had done nothing wrong. He obeyed Jewish law, he paid Roman taxes and lived peacefully. How could the Romans condemn him? Still, the authorities had Jesus in custody, so they took Jesus to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled (26:57-58). This was an informal gathering of the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin. The high priest and elders held a preliminary hearing at night. Then in the morning, they formally decided to put Jesus to death (27:1).

False witnesses fail (26:59-63a)

"The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death." They called "many false witnesses" (26:59-60). The witnesses were not false in that they were all liars. The proceedings are false because there was no genuine quest for the truth. They seek evidence against Jesus that has a fragment of truth so they can condemn him. Let's always seek the truth, rather than information to confirm prejudices or decisions.

Despite the leaders' desire to gather testimony against Jesus, the first witnesses accomplished nothing. Jesus' moral purity made it hard to bring charges against him (John 8:46). Eventually, two came forward: "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" That's ominous, because desecration of a temple was a capital crime for Rome (26:60-62). Perhaps that's why the high priest marveled at Jesus' silence.

But the charge is garbled. Jesus once said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." But he meant that if they kill him, he would rise in three days (John 2:19-21).

Apparently even that court could see that the accusations were worthless. Jesus didn't even reply; he knew no one would listen. Proverbs 26:4 says, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself." Sometimes we debase ourselves by answering a fool. Jesus' silence also fulfilled Isaiah 53:7-8, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth... and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

Jesus testifies (26:63-66)

The false witnesses failed, so the high priest tried a direct question. Knowing that Jesus had claimed God-like authority, he said, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (26:63).

The question is not "Are you the Messiah?" The Messiah is the deliverer of Israel, but most thought the Messiah would be a talented man – a charismatic or military leader - who would liberate Israel from Rome.

To claim to be the Messiah is bold, but not blasphemous. The question is "Do you claim to be the unique Son of God, partaking in the Lord's deity?"

However Jesus answers, it can be used against him. If he says he is the Messiah, they will accuse him of rebellion against Rome (cf. John 19:12). If he says he is the Son of God, they will accuse him of blasphemy. Jesus replies (literally), "You have said so, but..." (Matthew 26:64). That is, "what you say is true, but I must explain."

One day, at a basketball game, a fan keeled over in the stands near me. The cry went up, "Is there a doctor in the house?" My child, just six years old, was with me; she knew I wasn't a physician, but people called me Dr. Doriani. She shot me a glance and someone noticed. He asked, "Are you a doctor?" I said, "Yes, but not the kind that can help physically. I am academic, not a physician."

In a similar vein, Jesus says, "Yes, but." "Are you the Christ?" Yes, but Jesus is not a political Messiah: "In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (26:64), (Psalm 110:1, Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus is no rival to Rome. He is the eternal king, sitting on the right hand of the Father, coming on the clouds. He will rule all peoples for all time.

If the high priest had wanted to conduct a genuine investigation, there was much to consider. Jesus fit the prophecies for the Messiah at point after point: Born in Bethlehem, of a virgin from David's line, performing mighty deeds, entering Jerusalem on a donkey, acclaimed by the people, yet betrayed by a friend. These are just seven of the prophecies Jesus fulfilled.

Jesus is condemned (26:65-68)

But the high priest did not care to investigate. He showed dismay when he "tore his clothes" (26:65). But he must have been thrilled, for he could use everything Jesus said against him.

When Jesus says he will sit on right hand of majesty, he is claiming deity. The priest assumes it's false and cries "blasphemy." Blasphemy brings death in Jewish law (Leviticus 24:16). Further, the claim to be Messiah makes him a rival to Caesar, so he is liable to death by Roman law. The authorities had what they wanted.

The high priest said, "Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" "'He is worthy of death,' they answered" (26:66).

Then they abused Jesus: "They spit in his face and struck him..., slapped him and said, 'Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?'" (26:67-68). He endured it in silence, like a lamb led to the slaughter. For so he is – the lamb of God, like the sacrifices of the Old Testament – quiet and meek, pure and spotless, a substitutionary sacrifice. John said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Coming to Jesus and standing firm

The book of Revelation teaches us the best way to respond to all that the Lord has done. There the angels and saints stop and praise:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!... Every creature in heaven and on earth [was] singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" Why the praise? Many reasons

First, he chose the cross for us. He understood the agony and asked, "Can this cup be removed?" The Father said, "No" and he chose it freely.

Second, he submitted to unjust arrest and to abuse. At one point, he knocked over his tormenters with a word and he could have done so again. Instead, he put himself in their hands and refused to escape despite hatred, injustice, and abuse.

Third, he did all this for his disciples, his friends although they fell asleep when he asked them to watch, then abandoned him and fled when the authorities seized him. Jesus' love for the disciples never ends. It has no conditions. It's like the love of a parent for a child. But it ought to rouse us to admiration, to love, to imitation – let us love him and love one another as he loved us.

Forth, he stayed the course because he knew it was the Father's plan. He was silent before his accusers, until the time came for him to declare his identity. He did declare it, knowing his foes would distort it, that it would lead to his death. That death was a miscarriage of justice, but more, it fulfilled the Father's plan.

So let us love and honor Jesus. He asked Peter, post resurrection, "Do you love me?" The questions still stands. Peter said, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." How sweet when we can say the same. "Yes Lord, you know that I love you."

Then Jesus says "If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15). And live a life of love, as he loved us. As we consider the last week, we see that his love had a focus, a focus that speaks to us: the importance of faithful endurance.