

# Jesus' Trial in Mark/Building the Temple

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We all want fair. Well, to be more accurate, we want fair half the time. When a good break we didn't deserve comes our way, we don't usually complain about it. However, when a bad break we think we didn't deserve shows up, that's a problem! We come to this quite early. Even Zoë, at her four-year-old level of wisdom, has begun to complain, "That's not fair!" I tell her to get used to it.

There are few people, though, who have had as much reason for complaint about unfairness as our Lord, Jesus. This is evident throughout His ministry, but it is most apparent during His trial. Even if we take the names out of it, we all know something is wrong when a man who hasn't done anything wrong is condemned to death. The situation in Jesus' case, though, is even more extreme than that. He invited such a brutal outcome by saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. He actively took such unfairness on Himself for our sakes. This morning, let's think about this before the Lord's Supper. Let's look at Jesus' trial in Mark.

The account of this trial appears in Mark 14:53-64. In context, Jesus has just eaten the Passover with His disciples, gone to the garden of Gethsemane to pray, been betrayed by Judas, and been arrested. His situation is dangerous, but it is not yet certain, at least in worldly terms, that He is going to die.

However, things certainly don't look promising for the Lord, as we learn from **THE SETTING** of this trial. First, all of this is happening at the house of Caiaphas the high priest. If we were ignorant of the politics of Jesus' day, we might think this was a good thing. After all, God's high priest on earth would be a good guy, right? Sadly, that wasn't the case. As we learn from John's account, Caiaphas was the first man to suggest to the Jewish leadership that they had to kill Jesus. Also, because he was high priest, he had a stake in all of the very profitable businesses being run in the courtyard of the temple, and when Jesus drove the merchants out, that hurt Caiaphas' pocketbook. In fact, of all of the people who are named in the gospels, it is probably Caiaphas who is Jesus' most dangerous and steadfast enemy. Holding this trial at Caiaphas' house is like asking a Cardinals fan to be the umpire for a Cards-Cubs game. It's just inviting trouble.

Second, the timing of the trial isn't encouraging either. After all, if the Jewish leadership had wanted to bring a genuine evildoer to justice, they would have held the trial in broad daylight, so that everybody who was interested would be able to hear the evidence against him and be convinced of his guilt.

This trial, though, is beginning at about 5 in the morning on Friday morning. Because of the timing, the only men who are on hand are the ones who were alerted to this beforehand. They are the chief priests, the Sanhedrin, the scribes, and the goon squad these men sent to arrest Jesus. When "the multitude" cries out for Jesus' crucifixion, then, we need to remember that this wasn't a scientifically sampled cross-section of Jewish society. These were the men that Caiaphas picked to be there, and they said whatever he wanted.

However, as ominous as these circumstances appear to be for our Lord, **A ROADBLOCK** for Caiaphas' efforts soon emerges, and it makes sense that it would. After all, if you're putting a man on trial who is actually guilty, the evidence almost lines itself up. All you have to do is find the people who saw the criminal act take place and get them to talk about what they saw.

As my brother the prosecutor would no doubt say, this is not an easy task. However, it's much easier than trying to convict someone you know is innocent. You can't just let people say what they saw, because that won't help you. Instead, you have to invent a story and train your witnesses to repeat it correctly.

Caiaphas is a smart dude. He knows this. However, he has a huge problem: time. We don't see this easily from our perspective, but all through this week, events have been moving quickly for good guys and bad guys alike. It's early Friday morning now. According to Mark, the Jewish leadership only decided that they needed to trap and kill Jesus on Wednesday. It was on Wednesday that Judas Iscariot first signaled his willingness to cooperate. It was Thursday night when Judas came to the chief priests and said, "I know where Jesus is, and I'll take you to Him." Jesus has only been in custody for a couple of hours, and the chief priests believe that if all this drags on until day, Jesus' followers will start a riot. They need to try Him NOW.

Because he has no other choice, Caiaphas begins the trial at once. He has a whole bunch of stooges who are willing to lie for him about all the wickedness they supposedly saw Jesus do. However, willing and competent are two different things. The false witnesses are too inventive, and their stories don't line up. It

looks like Caiaphas wanted to make the centerpiece of his prosecution Jesus' alleged plan to destroy the temple, but the false witnesses can't even manage to get their stories straight about that.

This is a prosecutorial disaster. Look at Deuteronomy 19:15. Under the Law, an accused criminal could only be condemned by the testimony of two or more witnesses, a requirement that was installed to prevent shenanigans like this. Two or more witnesses is exactly what Caiaphas doesn't have. Caiaphas wants to give Jesus' death a semblance of legality, but right now, if he kills Jesus, it looks like murder, plain and simple. There isn't any evidence against Him. In desperation, he asks Jesus to present a defense, hoping that Jesus doesn't see how weak the case is, but Jesus maintains a contemptuous silence. If the story ends here, the Jewish leadership is going to have to let Jesus go free. Their plot will be an ignominious failure.

However, help for Caiaphas and the gang appears from a most unlikely source: **JESUS' OWN ADMISSION.** For lack of a better idea, Caiaphas asks Jesus directly if He is the Messiah. Jesus says yes and predicts that His accusers will see Him seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Of course, before an honest court, this wouldn't have caused Jesus any problems either, because it's true. However, an honest court this one is not. What Jesus said looks like blasphemy if you squint at it just right, and better still, the entire Sanhedrin heard Jesus say it. Instead of only two witnesses, now there are 70. Caiaphas is overjoyed. He seizes the gift that Jesus has handed him, and they all quickly vote to condemn the Lord to death.

At first glance, this looks like Jesus as made a colossal blunder, but nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus didn't acknowledge that He was the Messiah because He didn't see the consequences. He acknowledged it because He did see them. Caiaphas doesn't realize it, but he and Jesus are actually working toward the same end—Jesus' death on the cross. Caiaphas has the malice to kill Jesus, but he doesn't have the evidence he needs to actually do it. Jesus gives him the evidence so God's plan can be accomplished.

Before the Lord's Supper, let's think about this. What would it take for you, what would it take for me to say something when we were on trial, if we knew that saying it would get us unjustly executed? Fear couldn't do it, for nothing is worse than death. A bribe couldn't do it, because money isn't any good to the dead. Only love for somebody else, someone we loved more than our own lives, could lead us to speak up. That's why Jesus spoke up: because He loved God, and because He loved us, even though we're not worthy of it. Let's reflect on the love of Jesus and the obligations it imposes on us as we partake.

For the rest of our service this morning, let's switch gears a little bit. Let's move from the spurious accusations that Jesus would destroy the temple to the actual rebuilding of the temple. This took place after the Jewish exiles returned from the Babylonian captivity. For some time after their return, they were discouraged by external opposition and allowed the temple to remain in ruins. However, prompted by the prophet Haggai among others, they took courage and rebuilt it, to the glory of God.

Even though this took place 2500 years ago, we can still learn a great deal from it. Today, there is work before us in the Lord's church, no less than there was before the postexilic Jews. We are still tempted to put our own business before the Lord's work, as they were. Finally, also like those Jews, we too will only find success when we devote ourselves to the Lord first. Let's look, then at Haggai and building the temple.

### **The Call to Build**

Haggai's revelation begins with a call to build. Within this call, he first identifies **THE PROBLEM** that the Jews have. Let's look together at Haggai 1:1-6. As I read this text, I can't help but sympathize with the Jews. Right now, things aren't going well for them. They've been able to put roofs over their heads, but they aren't prospering. No matter how hard they work, they can't seem to get ahead. As a result, they put God on the back burner. They don't rebuild the temple because they don't have the resources to spare.

God reveals, though, that they have their causality backward. It isn't their lack of resources that is delaying their rebuilding of the temple. It is the delay in rebuilding the temple that is leading them to lack resources. These people aren't idolaters. They aren't apostates. However, they also aren't putting God first, and because they aren't putting Him first, He isn't blessing them with all the other things they want.

Like the Jews of more than 2000 years ago, we also struggle with resources. Even though we live in a land of plenty, it seems like we never have enough. We never have enough money. We never have enough time. Because we are so busy, because we are continually trying to make up for this shortfall ourselves, it's easy for us to neglect the things of God. We want to contribute more to the Lord's work, but there are all

these monthly payments we have to make. We want to attend services more, but our jobs are so demanding. We want to help with VBS, but our schedules are already filled with vacations, summer camps, and baseball practices. Like the Jews, we reluctantly conclude that we have no choice but to put off *really* serving God until later when we have more time and money to spare, except that day never seems to come.

Let me suggest, friends, that we too have our causality backward. All of these problems don't lead us to put God second. Instead, we have the problems because we put God second. We don't believe Him when He tells us that He will always provide for us. We don't listen to what He tells us about the emptiness of materialism. As a result, we get stuck on this hamster exercise wheel of working more and more for less and less apparent benefit. We're looking for happiness through buying stuff and scheduling vacations, but none of those things will ever bring us the contentment and joy that come from a richer relationship with God. We want our kids to have the best of everything, but we forget that the most important thing is that we teach them to know the Lord. We get so caught up in chasing the world's priorities that we abandon God.

Next, God points out **THE SOLUTION**. Consider Haggai 1:7-11. Here, God makes explicit what He implied in the earlier reading. Because they weren't rebuilding the temple, God was actively working against them rather than for them. If they didn't change their attitude toward Him, they were going to live out the definition of insanity: doing the same thing and expecting a different result. Maybe they hadn't figured this out before, but now that God has told them what the problem is, they have no excuse to remain the same. They need to start working for Him now. No more if-only's; no more good intentions. Now is the time for them to go out, get some lumber, and start building.

Likewise, friends, we need to acknowledge the truth about our own struggles. If we haven't found a full, satisfying life in God, that's not His fault. It's our fault. He is a gracious God who longs to bless us, but when we ignore His promises in search of earthly satisfaction, we shut Him out of our lives. We come home from work, and we're so exhausted, and we look at the Bible on the table by the front door where we left it after Sunday services, and we say to ourselves, "I know I should read my Bible, but I just don't have the mental energy to do that right now." We turn on the TV instead, watch two hours of drivel that does nothing to make us better people, and we wonder why we're stuck in the spiritual mud. It's the definition of insanity again, brethren! The things of this life are intrinsically incapable of filling the God-shaped hole inside of us, and if we keep trying to stuff that hole with earthly things, we're going to continue being discontented.

If that's our situation, the prescription for us is the same as for the ancient Jews. We need to consider our ways and make the change. If we don't have time, energy, and money for the Lord, we need to make time, energy, and money for the Lord. Good intentions don't cut it. Resolutions for tomorrow don't cut it. We need to do things differently today, both individually and in the work we do for the church.

When you get home from work tomorrow, don't pick up the remote. Pick up the Bible. The next time there's a work day or a planning meeting, don't schedule some other activity. Don't worry about all the things you have to do around the house. The pleasures of this life will pass, and all of our possessions will be destroyed no matter what we do to care for them. Instead, seek the joys that are eternal, and store up possessions for yourselves in a place where nothing can harm them. Trust God, and choose accordingly.

Next, the narrative of Haggai emphasizes the importance of **LEADERSHIP**. Let's read Haggai 1:12-15. There are three names mentioned in this section of Scripture. One of them is the name of Haggai himself, but the other two are Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor. They are the two most important people in the Jewish nation, and once they get to work, the people follow them.

Today, of course, leadership is equally important. As a congregation, we don't have elders, but we still need leaders. In fact, it is precisely because we don't have elders that we need more ordinary Christians to step up. No one of us can fill the leadership vacuum; I certainly can't. I'm not qualified to serve as A pastor, much less be THE pastor, even if such an office existed in the church. I do what I can to the best of my understanding and ability, but my own efforts will never be sufficient.

What we need are people in this congregation who step up and say, "I see a need, and I'm going to do something about it." There are a number here who do this already, and I appreciate it, but we need more. The first part's easy. We certainly aren't a perfect church, and problems and projects abound once we start looking for them. The trouble is the second part. It's hard work to solve problems, but more than that, I think people are worried that it isn't their place, that they'll do it wrong if they start doing. Friends, let me tell you: ain't nobody here but us, and if each of us doesn't do the work we see, nobody else will.

## God's Encouragement

The next chapter of Haggai revolves around the encouragement that God offers to the people once they have begun to do His work. This is necessary because of **THE PEOPLE'S DISMAY**. Look at Haggai 2:1-3. Remember, friends, the temple that the Babylonians had destroyed 70 years before was the handiwork of King Solomon. At that time, Israel controlled pretty much the whole eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea and was fabulously rich. The temple looked like the crown jewel of an empire, because that's what it was.

At this time, though, the status of Judah was much diminished. The exiles had only returned to Jerusalem by the sufferance of the king of Persia. Judah itself was nothing more than one province of more than a hundred in the Persian Empire. Rather than other nations sending tribute to Jerusalem, the Jews sent tribute to their Persian overlords. It was impossible for them to build a temple as outwardly glorious as Solomon's because they simply did not have the resources. This became evident as soon as the foundations of the new temple were laid. The younger folks were impressed, but those who remembered the first temple knew better, and they wept because of the difference between what used to be and what was.

Today, too, it's easy for us to become discouraged by what we perceive as the paltry results even if we work for the Lord. Even if we dedicate ourselves to reading our Bibles, we're not going to have the grasp of the Scripture of some older preacher whom we admire. Even if we dedicate ourselves to working within the church, it's easy for us to compare ourselves to others and become discouraged. Even in the comparatively small pond of Joliet, we aren't the biggest fish. We don't have the most impressive building. We don't have the largest membership. Compared to others, our budget is modest. When we get to thinking that way, though, we need to pay special attention to what God says through Haggai next.

God's answer to the people's concerns begins with **HIS REMINDER**. Consider Haggai 2:4-5. Yes, things were different than they had been 500 years ago. Yes, the Jews no longer had a king. Yes, the Jews no longer controlled the wealth of a kingdom. However, one thing hadn't changed. Just as God had been with Solomon in his work, God was with Zerubbabel and Joshua in theirs. Because of that, the people didn't have to be afraid of irrelevance and failure. They could work with confidence in God.

Today, we can take comfort in the same thing. We look around at our increasingly godless world, and we start wondering whether our individual determination to please Him counts for anything at all. We look around at all the other churches that seem to prosper because they have departed from God's plan for the church, and it can be discouraging. However, God isn't with people like that, and in the end, their efforts will come to nothing. Even though we are a comparatively humble group, if we dedicate ourselves to doing God's will, then He will be with us. Once we recognize that, we don't have to be discouraged. We don't have to be afraid for the future. We can simply set our hands to the work before us. If we obey God's will, we cannot fail to accomplish His purpose, both as individuals and as a church.

The main discussion of Haggai concludes with **GOD'S PROMISE**. Haggai relates it in Haggai 2:6-9. Sure, the Israelites didn't have the power to accumulate all the materials they needed to make the temple as glorious as Solomon's temple, but God did. As it had been within His power to withhold, so too it was within His power to bless. He would bring to the Jews all the treasure of the nations if only they would be faithful to Him, and more importantly still, He would fill the temple with His own glory, a glory that no work of human hands could possibly hope to match. What the Jews couldn't do, God would do.

Even today, if we are determined to carry out God's will, He will happily give us the resources to do so. If you want the strength to carry out that Bible-reading program, pray for it. God will hear you. If you want His help in getting rid of some sin in your life, all you have to do is ask. He will surely match our resolve with His blessing. Likewise, friends, God will see to it that we have the resources we need to carry out His work in this place. He has promised that if we have a mind to be generous, He will always bless us with what we need to be generous. If we will only trust Him, He will never disappoint us.

Likewise, where once it was God's plan for His glory to dwell in His temple, today, that glory dwells in His people and in His church. There is no Christian here who is so humble that he cannot shine with the light of Christ. All we have to do is trust Him and seek Him, and we will lead lives that glorify Him. He will fill us with glory, and He will fill His church with glory. A group of people steadfastly serving Him will bring Him more honor and praise than the most impressive church building on the planet. We will glorify God through this life and through the life to come. The only thing that can prevent this is our own unwillingness.