

“God in the Hands of Angry Sinners”

Luke 22:63-23:12

On July 8th 1741, New England Puritan preacher, Jonathan Edwards, preached his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” In that sermon he warned sinners about their precarious position outside of Christ. His text was taken from Deuteronomy 32:35; “*Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; their foot shall slip in due time; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things to come hasten upon them.*” At one point in the sermon he made the following statement;

“The God that holds you over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the Fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his Wrath towards you burns like Fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the Fire; he is of purer Eyes than to bear to have you in his Sight; you are ten thousand Times so abominable in his Eyes as the most hateful venomous Serpent is in ours.”

In spite of the graphic imagery he used, we’re told that Jonathan Edwards followed his normal pattern of preaching. He read the sermon in measured tones with few gestures. Yet the power of his words was so great that he was interrupted multiple times by people in the audience moaning and weeping. They wanted to know how they could escape the judgment Pastor Edwards was describing. Many were converted to Christ that day.

In our continuing study of Luke’s Gospel we come to the section detailing Jesus’ trials before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. As I studied the text and meditated on the events as they’re recorded, I titled our study “God in the Hands of Angry Sinners.” While this is not a pleasant portion of Scripture, I trust our time in the Word together will be a blessing. Listen now as I read the text, **Luke 22:63 through chapter 23:12.**

In this text the true nature of man without God is expressed. The hatred and violence perpetrated against our Savior should cause us to stop and reflect on our own RESPONSES toward Him and the responses of unbelievers today.

The First RESPONSE is,

Blasphemous Cruelty

The record Luke provides for us doesn't contain all the details surrounding these events. So it's helpful to look at what the other Gospel writers add. It seems probable that the initial, nighttime examination of Jesus (which, by the way, was illegal) took place in the home of Caiaphas. It was not an official gathering of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish legal Council. Both Matthew and John record the events of our text, in verses 63 to 65, before Peter's final denial of Christ and the crowing of the rooster. Let me read from John 18:19 to 23.

“The high priest then asked Jesus about His disciples and His doctrine. Jesus answered him, ‘I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said.’ And when He had said these things, one of the officers who stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, “Do You answer the high priest like that?” Jesus answered him, ‘If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?’”

It seems that this blow from an unnamed Temple guard officer touched off the blasphemous cruelty outlined in our text. These Jewish leaders who had arrested Jesus with a cohort of Temple guards were committed to Jesus' destruction. Their actions proved they did not care at all about the safeguards built into their judicial system.

By this time in Jewish history the law mandated three requirements in a criminal proceeding: a public trial, a defense for the accused, and a confirmation of guilt by two or three witnesses. Because the requirement of two or three witnesses was so crucial to a just verdict, the law prescribed a severe penalty for false witnesses. They were to receive the punishment that the accused would've received if he had been guilty. In addition, capital offense cases needed to be conducted over a 2-day time span. None of these requirements were upheld in the case of Jesus.

We read in verse 63 that those who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking Him by beating Him. It was their way of showing their contempt for Him. The word beating refers to blows that bruise and break the skin. So this was more than a mere slap in the face, as insulting as that would've been. The hatred that led to the religious leaders ignoring of the law had emboldened their followers' outright cruelty. Some commentators even believe that Caiaphas and the other leaders joined in this abuse.

Not content with the pain inflicted by their physical abuse, Jesus' tormentors now blindfolded Him. Think about it; if you know you're going to be struck by someone, seeing that blow coming allows some measure of mental and physical preparation to receive it. But if you can't see, you have no idea when or where the blow is going to fall. According to John's record Jesus' hands were bound, so He was already quite defenseless from a physical standpoint. This blindfold adds insult to injury; it adds psychological torment to the physical.

After blindfolding Jesus, His tormentors specifically mocked His prophetic powers. As slap after slap and blows of clenched fists rained down on Him, His assailants laughingly tormented Him. "Prophecy; who is it that struck you?" All of this Jesus endures without comment or protest. This is our Savior, our sufferer, our example.

Here we see the unredeemed nature of man in its full horror. This innocent man, whom they could in no wise vanquish within the guidelines of the law, now becomes the object of their innate hatred and villainy. The inhumanity of man toward his fellow beings is well documented in world history. Let one example suffice; the French Revolution of the 18th century. Our lower nature loves to trample down those we perceive as being better than we are.

Verse 65 tells us that they spoke many other blasphemous things against Him. We can only imagine what they were, but certainly, earlier comments by the religious leaders give us some clues. In John chapter 8, in a discussion about whether or not the religious leaders were the true children of Abraham, we have these words; *"If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this; you do the deeds of your father."* Then they said to Him, *"We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God."*

There it is; out in the open. They were accusing Him of an illegitimate birth. One can only imagine the vulgarities they may have come up with relating to this accusation.

In Luke chapter 11 we read these words; *"And He was casting out a demon, and it was mute. So it was, when the demon had gone out, that the mute spoke; and the multitudes marveled. But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.'" Jesus reminded His antagonists about the absurdity of that statement. And He warned them that attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to demons was an unforgiveable offense! Yet here they were in our text, reviling and blaspheming Him, heaping up God's judgment on them.*

The Greek grammar used in these verses indicates that this abuse and mockery went on and on. Jesus' tormentors did not quickly tire of their sadistic pleasure. Knowing human nature as we do, they most likely were hoping for some kind of reaction from Him. Trying to vindicate Himself, pleading for mercy, cursing His tormentors and more were things they would've expected Him to do. But Jesus bore all their blasphemous cruelties without a word. That, in itself, may have intensified their hatred and mockery.

One of the sobering truths to be remembered in this whole scene is that Jesus predicted His followers would suffer just as He did. In John 15:20 He said *"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also."* Most of us in the western hemisphere have not suffered this kind of persecution. But we see the potential for it increasing as people increasingly view the truth claims of Scripture to be bigoted and dangerous.

Perhaps, if we, like Jesus, got in the way of evil, we would suffer more blasphemous cruelty from those who oppose Him and His teachings.

The Second REASON is,

Baseless Condemnation

The scene changes now to the early hours of the morning. There is a formal convening of the Sanhedrin; that supposedly august judicial body made up of the most respected and educated men in Judaism. This was done for two main reasons; first, to give the events of the previous night some veneer of legitimacy, and second, to secure a capital sentence from Pilate, the Roman procurator. The other Gospel accounts record how their attempts at a trial were a complete flop.

So these men, most of whom had already made up their minds what to do with this troublemaker, brought the bruised and battered Jesus before the group for questioning. Again, their questioning was not designed to get to the truth. Their questioning was designed to trap Jesus and give them a reason to hand Him over to Pilate for execution.

Again, the question is "Are you the Christ?" It was this same question asked in the night session recorded in Matthew 26:63 to 66 that led the High Priest to pronounce Jesus worthy of death. Only then, the High Priest had added "the Son of God." Now the question is being asked without that phrase before the officially gathered judicial body. But Jesus knew their hearts and

what the eventual outcome of this questioning would be. Notice His response, “*If I tell you (in what sense I am the Messiah), you will (absolutely) not believe (that I am who I say I am)*”

We must remember that in the thought of the Sanhedrin, the title, Messiah, had a nationalistic, highly political, and earthly meaning. There was no way Jesus could identify Himself with such an understanding. Whenever the multitudes that followed Him suggested making Him king, He slipped away from them; that was not His purpose. Yet to deny the question totally would be dishonest, so he qualified it by saying they wouldn’t believe the real truth about who He was.

Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing was dramatic proof that He was the Messiah the prophets had promised. He had healed the lame, restored sight to the blind, cleansed the lepers, and raised the dead. And He had preached the gospel of the kingdom of God. Nothing else He could have done would convince these unbelievers to accept Him for who He was.

Jesus went on to say “*If I ask also ask you, you will neither answer me nor release me.*” Once again He is referring back to a previous conversation with the Jewish leaders in Luke 20:41-44. Here is part of that conversation. “*And He said to them, ‘How can they say that the Christ is the Son of David? Now David himself said in the Book of Psalms: ‘The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’’ Therefore David calls Him ‘Lord’; how is He then his Son?’*”

To tell them whether he was the Messiah he would have to explain that he was the Messiah in the Scriptural sense; and if he took them into the Scriptures and from these showed them the Messiah he was and asked them if this were not so, they simply would not answer just as they had refused to answer before this time. Jesus thus briefly and clearly gave the only reply he could give to this question about his being “the Christ,”¹

But then, so as not to leave any confusion about His identity, Jesus adds the words of verse 69. “*Hereafter the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the power of God.*” Here, Jesus uses His favorite designation of Himself; Son of Man. It highlights His humanity and avoids the Jewish entanglements and political conceptions of Messiah. It is in His humanity that the Son of

¹ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). [*The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*](#) (pp. 1095–1096). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

Man appears before this Council in deepest humiliation. But His humility will yield for Him a place of power at the right hand of the Father.

With this statement Jesus points out that the very death that is being plotted as He speaks will be that instrument that will elevate Him to the right hand of His Father. In that position He will exercise the power of God in judging those who are now judging Him. His words are very similar to those He uttered in response to this question in the earlier nighttime interrogation.

At this reply, the meeting erupts with mingled shouts as all cry out “*YOU! Are you then the Son of God?*” The question is asked with outrage and incredulity as the bruised, bloodied captive stands before them! Indeed, this question had been asked before; it was the reason they had condemned Him to death. But it must be confirmed before the sentence of death can be legally verified.

Without any hesitation Jesus affirms the all decisive question just as He had the night before under oath. He answers them in the common idiom of the day; “*You yourselves are saying that I am.*” To us the answer may seem evasive; here’s what His listeners heard. “I am the Son of God exactly as you are stating it in your question.” Or as Leon Morris puts it “I would not put it like that, but since you have, I cannot deny it.” His statement is an unqualified affirmation of the fact and the proof is found in the reaction of the Council.

After hearing Jesus’ words they concluded that no further witnesses were needed. Further witnesses; what further witnesses? They didn’t have any witnesses to begin with because their witnesses didn’t agree. They must have had a twinge of conscience even to mention the subject! But now, they didn’t need them because they had heard Jesus’ declaration from His own mouth. Note that Luke doesn’t confirm the death penalty; he didn’t need to because they immediately set about carrying out their sentence.

So Jesus suffered their baseless condemnation. He was condemned to death by the Jews, not because this or that lying charge was preferred against him, not on false testimony, but because of his being what he in very truth was: “the Son of God.” It is Jesus himself who here places us at the parting of the ways: we either join these Jews in their verdict that he lied and

perjured himself when he declared to them that he was the Son of God; or we join Jesus, “who is the faithful Witness” (Rev. 1:5), and worship him as “the Son of God” in the truth of that name.²

And so, the whole multitude of them having risen from their seats, escort Jesus to Pilate’s judgment hall. Remember, this is still very early in the morning according to verse 66. We’re told that the Roman courts were always available early in the morning. Wouldn’t it have been enough to send Jesus under guard with a few representatives from the Sanhedrin to make the case before Pilate? Oh no. First, these leaders were very much concerned that the common people would find out what was happening and attempt to snatch Jesus from their grasp.

In addition, they most likely thought that a crowd would make a greater impression on Pilate than just a few individuals. After all, if they were truly bringing before him a dangerous criminal, such a prisoner must be carefully guarded lest he escape.

Arriving at Pilate’s judgment hall, which was most likely the fortress of Antonia, they began to accuse Jesus before him. Again, we flip to John 18:28 to 32 to get the full picture of what is happening here.

“Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover. Pilate then went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this Man?” They answered and said to him, “If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you.” Then Pilate said to them, “You take Him and judge Him according to your law.” Therefore the Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death,” that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.”

Notice that in response to Pilate’s question about accusations, the leaders are very evasive. They inform Pilate that if Jesus had not been a law breaker they wouldn’t have brought Him to the judgment hall. You see, Pilate thought they wanted a trial; what they really wanted was for him to carry out the verdict they’d already reached. And he was having no parts of it.

So Pilate put the ball back in their court. He said, “Take him and judge him according to your law.” And then they revealed their true purpose in bringing Him to Pilate. They said “it is

² Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). [*The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*](#) (p. 1099). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

not lawful for us to put any man to death.” Pilate refused to do their bidding so they are compelled to take the role of accusers. This brings us back to our text, chapter 23, verse 2.

They address Pilate with the first accusation; “*we found this fellow perverting the nation...*” Addressing Jesus as “this fellow” was a very derogatory way of speaking and showed their disdain for Him. Their use of the words “we found” implies that they went through the legal procedure of a trial. Perverting the nation means that Jesus was an agitator, disrupting the nation from its peaceful course. These men knew Rome wanted no part of political agitation and they were currying favor by suggesting they had stepped in and squelched the agitation.

The second accusation is that Jesus forbade giving tribute to Caesar. Some of the very same men who earlier asked Jesus about this exact subject may have been in that crowd of accusers. They knew what Jesus had said; and so did the leaders, the ones who had sent them to try to trap Jesus. You can read about it Luke 20:19-26. Jesus clearly told them to render to Caesar the things that belonged to Caesar. The context makes it clear He was telling them to pay their taxes. But though they knew the truth, not one of them spoke up – baseless condemnation.

And then the third accusation; he says he is a Christ-King. The name Christ would’ve meant nothing to Pilate so the Jewish leaders shrewdly tacked on the word king. “A Christ-king,” one who capitalizes the Christ-hopes of the Jews and is therefore vastly more dangerous than any ordinary pretender to the throne of Israel would be. Like Herod the Great and men who had only political interests. Pilate and anyone who was slightly acquainted with the Jews knew of this Christ-hope of theirs. This charge is made the last, the climax, and throws light on the other two.³

But these are completely baseless and are not mentioned at all in either of the two earlier court sessions! These religious leaders are asking for Jesus’ death based on the outright lies. But that is the nature of unconverted men who hide behind the façade of religion.

So Pilate takes the accusations and begins to examine Jesus. According to John’s record of these events Pilate takes over custody of Jesus from the Temple guard and takes Him into the judgment hall. Since the accusation that Christ was a king was the basis of the other two accusations, it is the only one that Pilate addressed. His question, like that of the Sanhedrin before him, is tinged with incredulity and mockery. “YOU; are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus’

³ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). [*The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*](#) (pp. 1103–1104). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

response is almost identical to His response to the Sanhedrin in chapter 22, verse 70; *“You yourself are saying that I am.”* John’s Gospel records a longer dialog between Pilate and Jesus where Jesus makes it clear that the kind of kingdom He is leading is no threat to Rome.

But Pilate’s conclusion is that Jesus has done nothing worthy of death. This is the first of five times Pilate declares Jesus’ innocence! He brings Jesus out of the judgment hall and states his conclusion to the crowd. His conclusion is the opposite of the Sanhedrin. But he fails to follow through on his decision. Legally he should have released Jesus and dispersed the crowd, by force if necessary. His failure to do so eventually led to his capitulation to the Jewish leaders.

Immediately the crowd becomes more vehement in their accusations. They accuse Jesus of stirring up sedition in Judea and Galilee and the whole way to Jerusalem. Pilate was quite aware that many of the seditious movements against Rome began in the region of Galilee.

He also knew that Herod Antipas was in Jerusalem for the Passover. Here was a way, he thought, to escape his dilemma and curry favor with Herod. He would “remand” Jesus to Herod’s jurisdiction. But there’s a problem; Pilate had already rendered a verdict. With this decision, Pilate throws legal procedures and safeguards to the wind! The ultimate outcome is no longer in any doubt. This was a thoroughly baseless condemnation.

The Final RESPONSE is,

Biased Condensation

Verse 8 of our text informs us that Herod was delighted to see Jesus. He was also pleased with Pilate’s gesture. He had heard many things about Jesus and had been hoping for a long time to see Him. Evidently, he had gotten over his fright that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. You can read about that in Mark’s Gospel and chapter six. You will recall that Herod had John the Baptist beheaded because the prophet confronted his adulterous relationship with his brother, Philip’s, wife. So Herod’s desire to see Jesus spanned a couple of years at least.

Part of Herod’s continuing desire to see Jesus was that he hoped Jesus would perform some entertaining miracle in his presence. He regarded the miracles of Jesus as nothing but exhibitions that put on a novel and an astounding show. Kings often entertained their courts and themselves by calling in some expert and having him perform his feats for their delectation. That

is what Herod hoped to secure from Jesus at some time. And when he now had Jesus before him he thought that the hour had come to have his craving satisfied.⁴

But notice, even though Pilate has remanded Jesus to Herod, nothing even remotely like a trial takes place. Unlike Pilate, Herod does not sit on the judgment seat or make any effort to proceed with the legal process. It's true, he asked Jesus many questions, but they evidently were not of the nature to uncover the truth about who Jesus was. Since Herod was so interested in seeing Jesus perform miracles his questions may have centered more on how Jesus accomplished them; were they real, and if so, how did he do them?

Herod demonstrated a biased condescension toward Jesus. He saw Jesus as a magician, an entertainer, not as a prophet of God. Jesus knew this and to all of Herod's ridiculous questions Jesus answers not a word. Had Herod conducted a trial, I believe Jesus would've answered his questions. But Herod was putting on a show for his court and Jesus' silence showed His scorn for this "fox" and his antics.

When Jesus would not cooperate with Herod's charade, Herod reveals his true feelings about Jesus. If Jesus would not respond to him as the legal ruler in Galilee, then Herod would treat Him as nothing. Not only would he ignore Jesus' claims, he would openly mock Him. In response to the continuing accusations of the Sanhedrin, who had followed their prisoner to His palace, Herod and his retinue mocked Jesus and gave him a shining robe to wear. The "gorgeous robe" spoken of here is often used to speak of the shining white of angel garments.

When all of this mockery is concluded, Herod remands Jesus back to Pilate. Herod was too cunning to accept jurisdiction over Jesus. His earlier superstitious fear of Jesus being a resurrected John the Baptist had long since been dispelled. Furthermore, Jesus had never spoken against him personally, so what did he care what the Sanhedrin wanted. He had his fun and now Jesus will go back to Pilate.

Our text ends by telling us that Pilate and Herod were made friends on that day. What had been the source of friction between them we do not know. Pilate had shown deference to Herod's position as ruler in Galilee by sending Jesus to him. And Herod had shown deference to Pilate by allowing him to make the final disposition of a case that was rightfully Herod's.

⁴ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). [*The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*](#) (p. 1109). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

Herod and Pilate have been compared with each other. Both men find Jesus harmless, not in the least dangerous, at most a fanatic. But Herod laughs at Jesus and makes a great joke of him; Pilate is impressed more and more by Jesus, goes to great lengths to set him free, and labors to rid himself of the blood-guilt of his death.⁵

My friend, we look at this whole process as historical, which it is. But aren't these responses to Jesus' claims to deity still present with us today? Does not God still allow Himself to be placed in the hands of angry sinners? The blasphemous cruelty meted out to many of our brothers and sisters in Christ in other lands is just one manifestation of the hatred of Christ.

The kind of baseless condemnation that put Jesus on the cross is responsible for the imprisonment and death of many Christians today. They are often accused of being "enemies of the state" when in reality they are the most model citizens of their communities.

And many times they are the victims of biased condescension too. They are laughed at, ridiculed, mocked, and regarded as nothing. They are treated as Paul writes in First Corinthians 4:13; "*...as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.*"

Yes, God allowed Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, to be placed in the hands of angry sinners. He was delivered to death by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of the Father. Yet all those who participated in that heinous crime, including you and me, are held personally responsible for our choices. Our sin nailed Him to the tree in order that the same sin might be atoned for in His vicarious suffering

For all those who by faith accept that death of Christ as the only thing that could satisfy God's wrath against sin, there is forgiveness and eternal life. For those who reject and refuse His offer of salvation and eternal life they remain sinners in the hands of an angry God.

⁵ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). [*The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*](#) (pp. 1112–1113). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.