

Scapegoat. Are you familiar with that word? We've probably all heard it. According to my computer's dictionary, a Scapegoat is 1) *a person who is blamed for the wrongdoings, mistakes, or faults of others, especially for reasons of expediency*. But, where did such an idea come from? The Scripture, of course! The second definition my gadget provided goes something like this: 2) *a Scapegoat (in the Bible) was a goat sent into the wilderness after the Jewish chief priest had symbolically laid the sins of the people upon it (Lev. 16)*.

⁵ take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering. ⁶ "Aaron shall ... ⁷ take the two goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁸ And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel [the meaning of which is unknown; traditionally a "scapegoat"]. ⁹ And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD and use it as a sin offering, ¹⁰ but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

God instructed the priest to provide two goats as a substitute for the people's sin: the priest would sacrifice one, and symbolically lay the sins of the people upon the other before sending it away, outside the camp, into the wilderness. The message to God's people was clear: *Sin was deadly, it required blood sacrifice, and therefore did not belong among God's people*. These goats were the substitutes required to atone for man's sin. This is where the doctrine of "substitutionary atonement" comes from. Jesus, the Lamb of God, became our once-for-all *Scapegoat*, if you will; He became our substitute, paying the debt of our sin in order to atone or satisfy God's just wrath, the wrath of our righteous, holy God against sin. *That* is what these verses in Matthew are all about.

57 This was a gathering of the highest Jewish authorities: what was called *The Sanhedrin*. The Sanhedrin was made up of the *high priest* plus *70 members* from three groups: *priests*, *lawyers* (or scribes, teachers of the law) and *elders*. Keep in mind, by our timetable, all of this took place late Thursday night and into the early hours of Friday morning. No work was permitted on the Sabbath which was Saturday, which—by the Jewish standards—began at dusk on Friday evening. So the Sanhedrin had to work quick to get a verdict to Rome Friday morning in time for Jesus' crucifixion before the Sabbath. Most likely, not all 70 members of the Sanhedrin were in attendance that night with Caiaphas, but all they needed was a mere quorum of 23 or more.

What I would like us to note here is that the highest religious authorities found Jesus guilty. What's the point? Beloved, just because someone has been appointed to or considers themselves a religious authority of sorts, that doesn't mean they are exempt from making some serious mistakes. The pedigree of these leaders went right back to Levi himself, and yet it was these very men that put forward their Christ for murder. If *they* were so capable of being wrong, don't for a second think that there aren't men in pulpits, on TVs, in suits & ties, holding sway over masses, who aren't just as capable of leading many astray today, of ruining thousands of souls. The words of any man—especially those in position of religious leadership—must align with the Word of God. So long as that's the case, follow them; but not a step beyond. So long as they follow the full counsel of the Bible, they can be trusted. But be on alert for those who prop up their own private perspective with a short passage here & there taken completely out of context. Know the Word. The best way to tell a counterfeit is by knowing the real thing.

58 O Peter; beloved Peter: Mr. Brave, Captain Courageous... *following at a distance*... setting up camp with the temple police, with other servants, waiting to see what would happen to his Lord. There sat *The Rock*... somewhere between courage & coward. Ever been there? Ever been there with your faith? with your faith in Jesus?

59-63a What was the Sanhedrin looking for? Evidence, right? Careful though. Matthew makes it clear that they were after more than just evidence, more than just *testimony*. Matthew said they were after "false testimony against Jesus that they might put Him to death." And where would they find false testimony? Again, according to Matthew, from "many false witnesses [that] came forward." Were they able to find any *veritable* false testimony? No! There's no such thing.

But then—"at last", those are words of desperation, aren't they?—"At last two came forward," with something most, if not all, had heard come from Jesus' mouth at one point or another: *Destroy the temple of God and in three days He would rebuild it.* Now, I really don't think the Sanhedrin was so much looking for false evidence—looking for lies—so much as they were looking for something believable & true that would support *their* judgement. Were they already convinced of the outcome they wanted? Absolutely. They wanted Jesus dead! So they went through whatever they had to in order to ensure their verdict. You know this as well as I do, when people *hate* so much, when they are so persuaded of something they really want to be true, even when it's not, they will *readily* accept whatever false witness they can find so long as it supports what they want to believe. If evidence turns up contrary to their perspective, they might accept it, but deep in their heart, they still want to believe what's false: the worst, rather

than what is true. Matthew knew Jesus wasn't guilty, so he makes clear that the evidence they were seeking was false, not true. There is no true evidence *against* the One who is the Truth.

How many witnesses came forward? Two. Why? Because that's what OT law required, especially for capital cases like this one. They wanted two, they got two. *"Enough is enough! This Man threatened to desecrate the temple!"* Their homeland security regarded this as a *capital offense*, worthy of death! ¿But, in John 2.19-21, when Jesus spoke about the destruction of the Temple, was He referring to the physical structure, the actual Jewish temple-building? No, not at all. He was referring and declaring Himself to be the true Temple, the real & ultimate meeting place for God & man, just the sort of claim they would kill Him for.

So now here He stood, practically condemned already, but still... legal proceedings were required, no matter how swift & unjust. *"Have you no answer to make as to their testimony against You?"* NO! Not a word. Why not? Two reasons: First, their testimony wasn't AGAINST Him, it was the Truth: after the true Temple was destroyed, after He was crucified, He would be raised again in three days. That is absolutely true! That's not a *witness against Him*, but a witness for Him! And, secondly, His silence, once again, was simply a fulfilling of the Scripture, Scripture written 750 years before from Isaiah 53.7, words some of you will read again in a couple of days in the two-year Know.Gd plan: *"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."*

63b Clearly Jesus' silence had frustrated the man in charge... or *the man who thought he was in charge*, I should say. Here he made a serious demand: *"I solemnly require you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God!"* By leveraging the name of the living God, the high priest put Jesus under oath to answer him: *Are You the One or not?!*

Would Jesus answer Him? Would an answer make any difference? Was their verdict already in? If Jesus *doesn't* answer, then He breaks the high priest's legal demand. If Jesus denies it, all of His influence over the crowds is gone, which is exactly what they want. If He affirms it, however... If Jesus tells the truth, if before the Sanhedrin He confesses to be the Messiah, then clearly, at least in their minds, with all of their prior commitment to their own will, to their own preconceived ideas about His identity—clearly, if He claims to be the Messiah, then He must be lying! Their unbelief simply prevented any other option other than Jesus' guilt and death. This wasn't a trial, this was the *condemnation of man*, of the highest religious party on earth, the condemnation of God's own Son by the very leaders of God's chosen people Israel.

64 Did Jesus answer the lawful demand of the high priest? Yes He did. Here is perhaps the clearest of Jesus' claims of being the Son of God, the Messiah. But, we don't have to be a scholar to see that the way He answered the high priest's question was a bit odd & interesting. It's not exactly, "Yup, you're right: that's Me!" is it? No, clearly there's more going on here. Note the *affirmative*, as well as the *contrast*. The 'Yes' comes in the form of "You have said so." The contrast comes in the very next word: "*But...*" In other words, "Yes, I am the Messiah, but not the one you're looking for, not the sort you have in mind." Caiaphas' and the Sanhedrin wanted a *political* power who would come and put the Gentiles under their control. No way, therefore, could they conceive of a Messiah who would permit Himself to be *captured* like this, bound, standing trial, in jeopardy of losing His very life, as though it hung in *their* balance. That's the not the sort of Messiah they had in mind. Not at all. And that's why Jesus was condemned in their minds even before His trial began. And that's why Jesus answered Caiaphas the way He did: "Yes I am the Messiah as you say, but NOT the kind you're looking for. But! the next time you see Me, there will be no doubt in your mind of the truth of My identity, for I will be seated at the right of God Almighty, coming on the clouds of glory!" This is Jesus' climatic self-disclosure, the one Matthew has been moving toward from the beginning. And let us note carefully that as much as Jesus' words here reveal the Truth, they also warn of the Truth, of the truth of His coming again to judge those standing against Him.

65-66 Clearly they understood Jesus' claim to be the Messiah, the begotten Son of God, God the Son. Otherwise, the rending of their garments wouldn't make any sense. Blasphemy was their charge. Why? ¿Because He claimed to be Messiah? Or maybe it was because He claimed to be at the right hand of the Father? Or maybe they just thought that God the Father just hadn't provided enough proof through Jesus' power & miracles that would attest to His Messiahship? I mean... everyone calms storms, right? ...heals lepers, makes the deaf hear, the blind see, satisfies the bellies of thousands with a few fish & chips... everyone raises three-day dead men, right? Well, whatever their particular reasons may have been, clearly they got the point: Jesus had absolutely claimed to be their Messiah, the One of whom it is written in the Psalms and by the prophet Daniel:

The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." –Ps110.1

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days & was presented before him. -Dn7.13

67-68 In the Sanhedrin's estimation, the *real* Messiah would vanquish all of His foes, not be spit on by them. Jesus' patient suffering & silence only further convinced them that they'd nailed their verdict, that this Son of Man deserved to die. If He couldn't even tell who struck Him, who His enemies were, how in the world could He ever be their Messiah.

How much suffering did the Servant of man endure throughout His earthly life? He was labeled a drunkard, a glutton, a friend of sinners, a half-bred Samaritan. In our passage today, just moments after being found falsely guilty, He is spit on, slapped, beaten, mocked. Satan ceaselessly adds insult to injury to the Son of Man. What a remarkable human being. The Maker in all His majesty walked among those whose lives He created, whose lives He sustained, even as they sought to destroy His. As JC Ryle said, how wonderful & strange this all was. Wonderful in that the holy Son of God would voluntarily submit Himself to atrocities and abuse in order to salvage and redeem the very miserable sinners who sought to end Him, sinners just like us, Jews & Gentiles alike. Equally wonderful was the fact that all of this was foretold over 700 years prior, and no one knew that better than the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious leaders who had not only been trained but who had excelled in such understand & even teaching such information. I wonder if, not long after, any of them recalled the words of their prophet Isaiah from chapter 50.6: *"I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting."*

From this, brothers & sisters in Christ, let's take leave here with at least one easily seen point of application. Just as our Master said in John 15.20, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." Let us never be surprised by the fiery trial, the spit, the ridicule, the mockery we may endure because we belong to Christ. The disciples is not above the Master. If they fashioned such weapons against our Lord, let us expect as much, and, like Jesus, be all the more prepared in prayer & clothed in the power of His Spirit to love those who hate us and bless those who persecute us. If we are ever called to suffer a few drops from the cup of His suffering, may we find company, comfort, encouragement in care knowing that He drank the whole cup, to the dregs, and was so crowned the King of kings, and Lord of lords. Let us entrust ourselves to the love & good care of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

PRAYER

SONG: *Jesus, Thank You*

COMMUNION

SONG: *Glorious Day*

BENEDICTION: *Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. -Jud24-25*