

Jesus and the Sham Trials

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, February 25, 2025
PASSAGES	John 18; Matthew 26; Isaiah 52; Psalm 22
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:01:39 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Every part of Jesus' trial was crooked — the venue, the charge, the verdict, the swap. And none of it slipped out of God's hands for a second. What looks like a man overpowered is a King laying down his life on purpose, and the proof is standing right there in the courtyard: a murderer walking free because Jesus took his charge.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Judas was needed because a daytime arrest risked a riot. Even the secrecy of it was mercy of a kind — one ear got cut off instead of who knows how many.
- ◆ Caiaphas said more than he knew. “It is expedient that one man should die for the people” was policy on his lips and prophecy from God's.
- ◆ Jesus had no secret second teaching. His public ministry was an accurate representation of his ministry, which is why interrogating him produced nothing.
- ◆ Peter meant every word of “I will never disown you.” Conviction and nerve are not the same thing, and the gap between them opens at a charcoal fire on a cold night.
- ◆ The priests condemned Jesus for blasphemy and then presented Pilate with sedition — and then asked for the release of an actual insurrectionist. The case was never about the charge.
- ◆ Pilate asked “What is truth?” standing in front of the answer, and could not perceive what he was looking at.
- ◆ Jesus had escaped crowds that wanted him dead many times before. This time he did not, because this time it was his hour.

- ◆ Barabbas — whose name means son of the father — is where you are standing in this story: guilty, named, and let go for no reason except that someone else was condemned in your place.

► 1:05:30

Matt promised a story that preaches itself, and then mostly got out of its way. The message was a walk through what he calls the sham trials — the way Jesus was handled, prosecuted and condemned after the last conversation with his disciples — reading John's account almost straight through, stopping where the injustice needs pointing at.

1. An arrest that looks like a loss of control

► 1:06:07

Matt used to wonder why the authorities needed an insider at all. Why not simply seize him? The answer is the crowd. Jerusalem was thick with Passover pilgrims, and even a night arrest in a dark garden turned into a scuffle — Peter got a sword out and took off a man's ear. Do that in daylight in front of a crowd of followers and you lose more than ears.

► 1:07:19

So they took him bound, first to Annas — not even the sitting high priest, but the father-in-law of the one who was.

“First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.”

JOHN 18:12-14 ↗

Caiaphas meant it as damage control: get rid of this troublemaker before he costs us the nation. But he was speaking under the influence of the Lord, and the sentence is truer than the man saying it. Matt kept returning to that all morning — this is not getting out of hand, this is in the Lord's hands.

2. In the high priest's courtyard

► 1:08:34

Peter follows, and another disciple — almost certainly the author himself — gets him through the door because he is known to the high priest (John 18:15-18). Matt offered a detail worth holding: these were

young men, not the greybeards of Renaissance paintings. For all we know the people who knew John assumed he was a promising kid who had been misled — we will handle this Jesus fellow and get John back on track. Then a servant girl at the door asks whether Peter is one of them, and Peter says no, and goes to stand at the charcoal fire with the officers because it is cold. Jesus had told him this would happen three times before a rooster crowed ([Matthew 26:34](#)); Peter had answered that it was him and Jesus to the end. Here is what that conviction is worth at two in the morning.

► [1:10:21](#)

“I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said.”

[JOHN 18:19–21](#) ↗

The people interrogating him already know what he has been saying. Jesus' public ministry was an accurate representation of his ministry — nothing subversive, nothing withheld, no second gospel kept back for insiders. There is no extra material to extract, which is exactly why the questioning goes nowhere and an officer resorts to hitting him ([John 18:22–24](#)).

► [1:12:23](#)

Back at the fire, the second and third denials come, and the last question is the one that should have been impossible to dodge: a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off asks, *Did I not see you in the garden with him?* ([John 18:25–27](#)). “I was just out on a stroll — also with a sword,” Matt offered, on Peter's behalf. The rooster crows.

► [1:13:36](#)

Then the walking begins. Garden to Annas, Annas to Caiaphas, Caiaphas to Pilate, Pilate to Herod, Herod back to Pilate — bound, in the cold, in the dark, paraded around a city. None of it necessary. All of it shaming, and Matt thinks deliberately so. The accusers stop at the governor's door so as not to be defiled and lose the Passover meal ([John 18:28–32](#)).

3. Blasphemy, quietly translated into sedition

► [1:14:46](#)

Pilate is not a sympathetic figure and Matt did not make him one — this is a man who had already provoked the city by marching Caesar's standards in by night, met the protest with a threat to kill the protesters, and later mingled men's blood with their own sacrifices. There is history here, and no trust

in either direction. Matt noted in passing that the gospel writers never go out of their way to insult him; they just tell it.

► 1:15:57

Pilate asks for the charge and gets a non-answer: if he weren't doing evil we wouldn't have brought him. In their own back-room trial the verdict had been blasphemy — making himself the Son of God — but that is not what they bring to a Roman. They secularize their animosity. And when Pilate tells them to judge him by their own law, the tell drops: *it is not lawful for us to put anyone to death*. So you want to kill this man.

► 1:16:25

John says this fulfilled what Jesus had spoken about the kind of death he would die, and Matt pointed to the Old Testament sitting behind it — the servant who acts wisely and leaves kings speechless (Isaiah 52:13–15), and David's prophetic “dogs encompass me... they have pierced my hands and feet.” “Dogs” is not an ethnic slur, he added; in a world with street dogs and no lap dogs it means enemy, and Israelite traitors get called it too.

4. “What is truth?”

► 1:17:27

Inside, Pilate asks whether he is the king of the Jews — a sedition charge, not a blasphemy one, because sedition is a problem Rome has to care about. Jesus asks whether the question is Pilate's own or somebody else's, and Pilate's answer is almost weary: *Am I a Jew?* This is the moment John 1 predicted in a single line — he came to his own, and his own did not receive him (John 1:11).

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from this world.”

JOHN 18:33–36 ↗

► 1:19:20

Matt would like to see the footage of that one. Handed a prisoner on a charge he does not understand by people he does not like, Pilate hears the man claim to be a king over truth itself — and answers with the two most famous words he ever said.

“For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world — to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

JOHN 18:37–38 ↗

He is standing directly in front of the answer and cannot perceive what he is looking at.

5. The swap

► 1:20:01

Pilate tries the Passover custom as a way out — release the king of the Jews and get back to his day — and the crowd asks for Barabbas ([John 18:39–40](#)). Mark says plainly what Pilate had worked out: he perceived it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up ([Mark 15:9–10](#)). Luke supplies the detail that turns the whole scene absurd — Barabbas was in prison for an insurrection started in the city, and for murder ([Luke 23:18–22](#)).

► 1:21:43

“Isn't it funny,” Matt said, “that the priests secularized their case against Jesus, massaging it away from blasphemy into sedition — but when Pilate offers to release Jesus, they ask for the release of a guy who's guilty of sedition.” Three times Pilate says he finds no guilt in him. Three times the shouting wins.

He also declined a sermon illustration most of us have heard. It is tempting to say the fickle crowd shouting *crucify* is the same crowd that shouted *Hosanna* — but Jerusalem is a large city at Passover, not a low-budget movie where the same extras change hats. There is no evidence it was the same people. The ones who received him with gladness probably meant it.

6. Pilate gets frightened

► 1:24:30

The flogging, the crown of thorns, the purple robe, the mock salute, and then *behold the man* ([John 19:1–5](#)). Matt's read is that Pilate is bargaining: look, I roughed him up, can that be enough? It never is. “I don't know if you've ever felt this in your own heart — when you mistreat someone, you just hate them all the more.” And here the priests finally say the real thing out loud: we have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God ([John 19:6–8](#)). Matt figures that landed on Pilate like a hammer. *What have I gotten myself into.*

► 1:25:46

“Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

JOHN 19:9-11 ↗

From then on Pilate sought to release him — until the veiled threat arrives: *if you release this man you are not Caesar's friend*. His job is on the line, and his job wins (John 19:12-16).

7. Jew and Gentile, united against their King

► 1:27:17

Matt asked the room to picture the scene whole. “Away with him, away with him, crucify him” — in Greek it rhymes, short and punchy, easy to chant even though we are not told they chanted it. On one side a crowd of accusers full of envy and bitterness. On the other a Gentile governor, self-serving, giving in to fear. And the irony is exact: the king of the Jews is unifying Jew and Gentile in the very act of their becoming his enemies. The faithful are out there somewhere, quiet, scattered, overpowered.

8. Which was God's own sham trial the whole time

► 1:28:57

Here the message turned. Jesus got in trouble constantly. He angered people badly and they tried to kill him more than once — and every time, the Father protected him. He walked through a crowd. He disappeared. Their nerve failed. God squashed and misdirected and led people away from killing Jesus over and over again. So the absence of that protection now is not a system failure. It is a decision. This time it is his hour, and he is laying down his life of his own accord.

► 1:30:19

Matt put the devil's position bluntly: once Jesus incarnated and brought the light of God to men, there were two options — receive him for who he is, or shed the very blood that saves. Both ways Christ wins. And the swap seals it. Jesus is convicted of exactly what Barabbas actually did, and Barabbas — whose name in Aramaic means *son of the father* — walks out. “This is like a pageant of God's mercy where everything is in Jesus' control. It looks like it's in Pilate's, or maybe the Jews'. It's not. This is God's doing, the whole thing.” Not a moment where things got out of hand. God's own orchestration of a scandal of justice, intended from the beginning.

9. Where you find yourself

► 1:31:41

Matt admitted he can identify with more than one of the bad actors in the story. But the seat with your name on it is Barabbas': "scummy, condemned, deserving of death and imprisonment — called by name, a child of the father, allowed to go free for really no good reason except that Jesus is condemned in his place." That is the gospel on full display, and it was assembled out of our own hatred of him.

► 1:33:07

Which is why he ended where the service began. Earlier he had the church stand and pray for the persecuted worldwide — some seventy believers killed in the Democratic Republic of Congo that week, around two thousand in that region over five years — and asked God to bless the militants into knowing him. The doctrine and the prayer are the same doctrine. "There's no situation in which God is outplayed." Movie villains get convoluted plots that come together in the end; nothing compared to this. The *how long* we sing is a question about timing, not about outcome.

And the last word was aimed at the room rather than at Congo. He is still seeking and saving the lost, still revealing the Father, still at work "in you, of all people." Matt said he had no idea what anyone was struggling with, but assumed the common thread: you do not think you deserve the mercy this time, the extra time, the thousandth time. You don't. He is doing it all the same, and it is his joy to do it.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [John 18:12–14](#)
- [John 18:15–18](#)
- [Matthew 26:34](#)
- [John 18:19–21](#)
- [John 18:22–24](#)
- [John 18:25–27](#)
- [John 18:28–32](#)
- [Isaiah 52:13–15](#)
- [Psalm 22:16](#)
- [John 1:11](#)
- [John 18:33–36](#)
- [John 18:37–38](#)
- [John 18:39–40](#)
- [Mark 15:9–10](#)
- [Luke 23:18–22](#)
- [John 19:1–5](#)
- [John 19:6–8](#)
- [John 19:9–11](#)
- [John 19:12–16](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Peter meant it when he said he would never disown Jesus. Where have you found the distance between your conviction and your nerve?
2. Jesus said he had spoken openly and kept nothing in secret. What does it change about how you read the Gospels to know there is no hidden teaching left to find?
3. The priests translated a spiritual objection into a political charge to make it land with Pilate. Where do you see that move being made now — or making it yourself?
4. Matt said the seat with your name on it is Barabbas'. What does it do to you to be handed that seat rather than a place among the observers?
5. Name the situation in your life that feels like it has gotten out of hand. If there is no situation in which God is outplayed, what changes in how you handle it this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUbW4RqYKy8&t=3699s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.