
People of the Passion: Caiaphas

BOB HEERSPINK

As Jesus journeys to the cross, he endures two separate trials; one with religious leaders and the other with political leaders. The first trial was before the Jewish Sanhedrin led by a high priest by the name of Caiaphas. What does that trial teach us, and how might we be like that first century high priest? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. So Dave, as you face issues in life, what is the biggest question you've faced, do you think, over the years?

DAVE BAST

Over the years? I don't know; right now it is how am I going to make enough money so I can retire?

BOB HEERSPINK

You're too near retirement, David.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I am kind of focusing on that. It is still too far away to really worry about it.

BOB HEERSPINK

What housing values are worth right now...

DAVE BAST

Right; I think that is what we really tend to worry about; you know, if we are honest; life issues, life questions.

BOB HEERSPINK

See, the things that are really urgent sometimes drive out the things that are important. You know, I think back to when I was in high school/college, I was really struggling with what my career might be, what direction I was going to go; but I think the critical question for me in the end, even with career and the like was, what about Jesus? What do you do with Christ? I was raised in a Christian home. I was taught these things from my youth up; but at some point in my life I had to ask the question: Am I going to believe this just because my parents believe it, or because I really think it is true?

DAVE BAST

Yes, but really Bob, I know you believe that, and I actually believe it, too. The most important question in life is who is Jesus? You know: Who do you say I am? And I have proclaimed that and I deep down believe it; but do very many people really believe that? I mean, outside of the circle of Evangelical Christians? Let's be honest. I don't think most people walk around worrying about how they answer the question: Who is Jesus Christ?

BOB HEERSPINK

No, I think it is a question... I think a lot of spiritual questions are just pushed off; you know, they are delayed, or people say: Well, how do you know? Maybe there are a lot of possibilities. They become agnostic about the whole thing.

DAVE BAST

Well, and even Christians... It strikes me that the average person in the pew... I mean, if you could look them in the eye and get an honest answer, they would probably say how you live your life is the most important question. Are you trying to follow Jesus or be a good person? I don't think very many people even in church today would still say: No, it's what you believe in your heart. Do you know the truth about him? Do you have the right doctrine about him? Do you believe he is the Son of God?

BOB HEERSPINK

In that sense, the historic Christian faith really is becoming, I think, very countercultural. The notion that what you think about Jesus really does matter, as opposed to embracing some kind of general principle of love or how you live your life. You know, very often Christians are seen at the... you know, they are kind of vanilla people... they are at the core of culture. I think more and more we are becoming... we are being pushed to the fringe; that believing the historic Christian faith is something that is shocking and offensive.

DAVE BAST

So you are saying that even believing that belief is important is countercultural – is kind of a minority view today?

BOB HEERSPINK

That believing things that you think can be said to be true is shocking. I mean, someone has said: Faith; what is it? It is believing things that aren't true. Well, actually, for a Christian it is just the opposite. We are believing things that we say are truth with a capital T, not just for us but for everyone.

DAVE BAST

So what does this have to do with this biblical character we want to talk about today – Caiaphas – the chief priest? I mean, we are looking at the story of Jesus' suffering and death – the climax of the Gospel – the Gospel of Matthew – these characters that are involved in the story. How is this relevant, and all this matter about who is Jesus?

BOB HEERSPINK

As I look at the story of Lent, what I find is interesting is that Jesus is put on trial actually twice. He is put on trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin with Caiaphas as the high priest, and then later he is going to appear before Pontius Pilate. The fact that these trials are so laid out in scripture I think is significant. Sometimes we might say to ourselves as we read the story: Let's just get past all this and let's just go to the big stuff. I mean, Christ was crucified. He rose again from the grave; but the Gospel writers really say it is a very important thing to understand what happened prior to the cross – how Jesus got there.

DAVE BAST

They take a long time, actually, don't they, to describe that. He is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane while he is praying. Judas comes with Temple soldiers, and so the people who actually arrest him aren't the Romans, but the servants of the priests, and Caiaphas is their leader. So he is first examined before the priests and the Jewish elders, what is called the Sanhedrin, and then they eventually turn him over to the Roman authority, to Pontius Pilate.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and I think the fact that these trials took place is a sign that the scriptures are stressing Jesus was not lynched by some wild mob. He appeared before the best of the best of his day. He appeared before the

religious leaders – he appeared before the governor – and the outcome was the cross; and to me, as I think about what happened, especially before Caiaphas, there is something about that trial that gets repeated in everyone’s life – in my life, in your life – in a sense, at some point, even though we want to postpone and procrastinate making a decision about Jesus, we have to put, as it were, Jesus on trial in our own lives and make a decision about him.

DAVE BAST

Here is all you really need to know about the world – the world that we live in – the world that we are a part of. When God came into our world as a man, we crucified him. You know, what does that say about humanity – humankind? And not only... like you said, it wasn’t a lynch mob; it wasn’t a kind of random act of violence or a loner who was a crazed gunman or something or the first century equivalent. It was the best legal system the world had at that point – the Roman legal system, which was supposed to be rule of law; and the best religion in the world; you know, the religion – the worship of the one true God – Judaism; and those were the forces that colluded in Jesus’ death.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, let me read the story to show you what the best religious system did when it came to evaluating Jesus. This is from Matthew Chapter 26:

⁵⁷Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the Law and the elders had assembled. ⁵⁸Peter followed him at a distance, right up the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. ⁵⁹The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, ⁶⁰but they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally, two came forward ⁶¹and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the Temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’” ⁶²Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” ⁶³But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” ⁶⁴“You have said so,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you, from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” ⁶⁵Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy. Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy, ⁶⁶what do you think?” “He is worthy of death,” they answered. ⁶⁷Then they spit on His face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, “Prophesy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?”

DAVE BAST

Ha, ha; very funny. So they make a joke out of it at the end after condemning him to death. Well, I think we can learn a lot about ourselves by digging into the details of that story – of that interview and trial. So let’s do that in just a few moments.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to the *Groundwork* conversation. Dave, just before the break, we were talking about the story of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. Here is Jesus on trial. We have been talking about the fact that, really, we all put Jesus on trial. Here is an example right out of the first century during the Lenten story, where Jesus is before the people who you would think would best understand who he is, and they come to a very different judgment on him.

DAVE BAST

Well, they violently reject him, don’t they?

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

The leaders accuse him of blasphemy. They are trying to gin up and case against him, and they even bring in false witnesses; so this from the outset is a terrible miscarriage of justice. It is a rigged trial; and yet, even the false witnesses cannot quite find agreement. Now, there is a whole Jewish law thing behind this that we probably don't need to go into, but you needed at least two witnesses to condemn a person, and the best they can come up with is this statement that Jesus made about the Temple; and then when the chief priest puts the question to him: Are you the Messiah? Jesus, in effect, says: Yes, I am. And then, he goes ballistic and tears... you know, this is blasphemy.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, but let's back up a ways and just ask the question: Okay, why did they go after Jesus this way; because there were other false messiahs in the First Century, even during Jesus' own time. We know that from what the historians tell us. They didn't all end up before the Sanhedrin. They didn't all end up crucified. Most were just ignored because the Sanhedrin said: Well, they are just talking off the top of their heads. Jesus was the one who got their focus, and to me there was something going on here that threatened the Sanhedrin in a way that those other messiahs – the false messiahs – didn't.

DAVE BAST

Okay; now the Sanhedrin is sort of the council of elders. They are the rulers of Jerusalem. Now they are under Roman authority, but I think Rome kind of let them – especially with religious matters – handle things; so they are the power block – the haves of that society, the people on top.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and I think it is important to recognize that key to the Sanhedrin were some folks called the Sadducees, and they ran the Temple. Caiaphas was the high priest. There were Pharisees in the Sanhedrin, there were some elders, but the Sadducees, I think, are key – Caiaphas is key; and what I think really is going on here is the Sadducees are hearing what Jesus says about their beloved Temple. Jesus says someone greater than the Temple is here; it is him. They have been hearing rumors that Jesus has said if this Temple gets destroyed, he will rebuild it in three days...

DAVE BAST

Which they take literally.

BOB HEERSPINK

Which they take literally.

DAVE BAST

He is talking about the temple of his body, John says.

BOB HEERSPINK

In fact, in the end, the accusation is *Jesus* said *he* would destroy the Temple in three days; but to me, the Sadducees are just being threatened here...

DAVE BAST

Plus, he has just done the moneychanger thing. He has cleansed the Temple, thrown them out; so...

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is where they get the...

DAVE BAST

He walks around like he owns the place.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly; and to me, I look at these Sadducees and they are not looking at Jesus and saying is this really the Messiah? They are saying this guy threatens us. This guy threatens our pocketbook; this guy threatens our power structures. We have a lot to lose if we let Jesus keep on this track.

DAVE BAST

Again, I agree with that, but it seems to me that we've almost tamed Jesus in the Church. We have sort of drawn his teeth so that he becomes a totally wonderful figure to us. We worship him; we say the right words, many of us who are Christians, who have grown up in the Church or who would call ourselves evangelicals. We acknowledge he is the Messiah – he is the Son of God; but doesn't he still represent to us a threat, too?

BOB HEERSPINK

Just look at what we do with the Palm Sunday story. I mean, we focus on the triumphal entry; we don't talk about the casting out of the moneychangers from the Temple, which is the real thing that got under, I think, Caiaphas's skin. I mean, we tend to pick and choose the stories that we emphasize about Jesus. We love the healings; we love the words of compassion; we don't spend as much time saying Christ is come and the axe is laid to the root of the tree and all righteousness is going to be burned up. I mean, I agree; we tend to domesticate Jesus, and we make him into a safe little lamb, when actually, he is the conquering lamb.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think of a line from the poet, W. H. Auden. He once said: I know Jesus must be the Son of God because nobody else makes me want to crucify him. Maybe there needs to be a little of that. We tend too quickly to fit Jesus into our whole system of life, and he just reinforces my comfort and my prosperity and my success; my country; my this, that or the other thing, instead of allowing him to be who he is. God comes into the world and the best of the world – the best – crucify him... and I can do the same thing.

BOB HEERSPINK

If we were on the Sanhedrin back in the First Century... If I was on the Sanhedrin, I would be no doubt thinking to myself: This guy has to be eliminated.

DAVE BAST

Blasphemy! This is blasphemy!

BOB HEERSPINK

We are going to lose it all. The Romans are getting way too uptight. I am going to lose my security blanket in the Temple. I am going to lose my source of income. Jesus is just going to cost me too much; and I think all of that is the kind of stuff we wrestle with even today when we try to make a decision about what we are going to do with Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Well, I want to look at the actual words that are spoken here, and not spoken, because there is this silence, and it is very interesting to me to dig one level deeper yet as we come to terms with this trial of Jesus. So let's take a break and then pick it up there.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Dave, just before the break you suggested we explore, really, the claims that are being made of Jesus; what Caiaphas is raising in the trial. I find it very interesting that at this point after we go through this discussion of what Jesus would or would not do to the Temple, Caiaphas has to stand up and he has to look Jesus in the eye and he says: I command you by oath, tell me whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God. Does that mean the trial is going bad for Caiaphas? Does he think he is losing the whole thing?

DAVE BAST

Well, look at what happens just before that. These witnesses came forward – finally two came forward, Matthew says. They had to have two witnesses who agreed, but what do they accuse him of? Simply saying: I am able to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days; which was a garbled thing, and not true; but the high priest then says to Jesus: Well, what do you say to that? Are you going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you? And Jesus remains silent. I cannot help but read that and think of Isaiah 53, you know: As a sheep before its shearers is dumb; so he opened not his mouth. There is this sort of majestic silence that Jesus maintains. Instead of saying: No, they got it wrong. I was speaking metaphorically. I am talking... He just stands there, and Caiaphas kind of goes off after that.

Bob Heerspink;

Well, if you look at this passage, it has so many different layers here about who Jesus is, because I think you are right. The fact that he does not respond at this point brings to mind the fact that he is the Suffering Servant...

DAVE BAST

The innocent lamb, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is a pointer to the cross; and then Caiaphas has to bring out the big guns and basically ask Jesus to self-incriminate himself; and Jesus gives this...

DAVE BAST

Self-incriminate himself?

BOB HEERSPINK

To incriminate himself, yes...

DAVE BAST

Okay.

BOB HEERSPINK

But in his response, Jesus doesn't say yes; he doesn't say no; he basically says: That is how *you* put it – that is what *you* say.

DAVE BAST

“You have said so.” He refuses to take an oath, which is also interesting in the light of something he said long ago: You don't need to take oaths, just speak the truth; and then he lays this on them – the ultimate: You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven; which is to say: Someday you are going to see me exalted at the right hand of God and returning to judge the world. Sometimes people say this tired old thing of, well, the apostles invented the idea that Jesus was God. He never thought that. He never claimed that. Well, this is what he says at the climax of his own trial. He makes this audacious claim.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and he really doesn't just say sometime way down the future. He says from now on. You know, it is not just, well someday... way down...

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is an interesting point; I didn't notice that.

BOB HEERSPINK

“From now on.” It is like: With my crucifixion and resurrection, all this is beginning, and you should see it – you are going to see it.

DAVE BAST

Right; everybody is going to see it; and not only the reigning Lord of glory who is himself God... and this is all spun out eventually in the New Testament, especially in the book of Revelation, where the lamb who was slain appears at the throne of the God of the universe, and they are both worshipped by all of the host of heaven; but also the one who is going to come; and of course, every devout Jew believed that the Lord would someday come to judge the earth; and Jesus says: It is going to be me. I am the one who is going to be the judge... just audacious, breath-taking claims of a guy who is on trial and he is going to be crucified.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, he is the Suffering Servant – he is the Christ – he is the Son of God – he is coming on the clouds of glory...

DAVE BAST

He is the coming Judge.

BOB HEERSPINK

He essentially makes himself equivalent with God; and all of this is wrapped up within sixty seconds in this trial before Caiaphas.

DAVE BAST

And no wonder the guy went nuts, you know, in response to this. What more do we need? We don't need witnesses anymore. He has just condemned himself. For a man to claim... and to a Jew especially. It would have been one thing... it would have been kind of over the top even in a Roman court for a man to claim divine status, but they had all kinds of examples of the divine Julius, you know, a man who became a god; but for a Jew, there is this chasm between the Creator and any other creature. So, yes, to his mind that was blasphemous.

BOB HEERSPINK

But you know, I think we have to come back to what you said just a little bit ago, Dave, with regard to who Jesus is. We have been talking about how we have to put Jesus on trial in our own lives to make a decision about his identity; and I think a lot of people, if they do that, say: Well, you know, I can live with Jesus as some kind of spiritual guru. I mean, there are a lot of folks out there that can point us in good spiritual directions. He has some great moral teachings. But you come to this passage, and it really is uncomfortable because Jesus is saying: That is not who I am. Yes, I am a moral teacher; yes, I give you good directions for life; but that is not the core. I mean, Jesus really, I think, sticks it to us here and says: This is who I am; do you believe it?

DAVE BAST

I agree completely. One of the things that came to mind as you were just saying that: You know, we have been sort of in the Gospel of Matthew in these *Groundwork* programs for quite a few weeks, and we started with the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes and the teaching of Jesus, and that is a great starting point for people. A lot of people still like that and admire it; but do you know where Matthew is headed? He is headed right to this point, with Jesus, not in the Sermon on the Mount, and not wonderful and all that and everybody should follow that example and that teaching, but Jesus the Lord of glory and the coming judge, and that is the progression that we all have to face; and ultimately, that is what makes this the most important question in life: What do you make of Jesus? What do you think of him? Because it is not just what you think of *him* that is going to matter for *you*; it is what *he* thinks of *you*; he is the Judge!

BOB HEERSPINK

And this kind of a trial, as it were, I think really happens again and again and again, because you just cannot confess who Jesus is intellectually. This kind of identity means that you respond; you live a certain way; I mean, look at the kind of reaction it elicited from Caiaphas. I think this is an ongoing trial, as it were, where we get up in the morning and we say: Okay, Jesus, Messiah, Son of God. He is the one who went to the cross for me. He is coming on the clouds of glory. Okay, today I really decide what I believe about him by the way I live.

DAVE BAST

Boy, isn't that the truth. This is not a one-time deal. Confessing Jesus as Savior and Lord; it is a daily decision that we all have to make, whether we have been born and raised in the Church forever and ever or we are just thinking about it for the very first time: Today I need to decide; will I crucify Jesus? Will I hold him at arms' length? Will I be offended by him and shove him away somehow or will I bow before him as who he is; because here is the truth. What really matters in the end is what he is going to say to me, and he is either going to say: Come, you blessed of the Father, join me; or depart from me, I never knew you.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you are thinking about. Suggest topics or passages that you would like for us to discuss on this program. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join with us in the conversation.

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