

"Encounters With Jesus"
"First They Led Him to Annas"

Jesus' physical life is about to end. He goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. It's there that Judas betrays Him. "So, Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons" (John 18:3). According to the gospel writer John, Jesus is then led to Annas: "So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year" (John 18:12-13).

Who is Annas? Annas once had been the high priest. Earlier in Jewish history the high priest was chosen for life. But when Rome conquered and occupied Palestine, the office of high priest became political, and became filled with a lot of intrigue and corruption. The office usually went to the highest bidder, or to the person most willing to toe the line with the Roman governor. High priests were chosen from a group known as the Sadducees. Though they were a *religious sect*, they were wealthy aristocrats and people of influence.

Annas, a Sadducee, had gained a tremendous amount of wealth and power. He himself had been high priest from 6 A.D. to 15 A.D. While he was in office, he came under suspicion of Rome, and was dismissed. But Annas was so wealthy and powerful that he was able to pull strings and let his money talk, and he kept the high priesthood within his own family. After he left as high priest, each of his 5 sons took a turn. And when Annas had gone the rounds with his sons, he used his influence to see that his son-in-law, Caiaphas, became the high priest. Annas was, in a sense, a first century "godfather", heading a religious mafia in Jerusalem.

The Sadducees, and priests, and family of Annas watched with interest, then with increasing agitation, this young carpenter-turned rabbi named Jesus. They became progressively alarmed as Jesus captivated the crowds, and even performed miracles. Would people think Jesus was the Messiah, and start a revolt against Rome? If so, their cozy little world of wealth and privilege would be wiped out!

Most likely the whole thing came to a head because of something Jesus did in the temple. Annas and his family controlled the temple market. The law required that people sacrifice animals, but they had to be animals *without blemish*. Animals brought from *outside the temple courts* were usually rejected, and judged unfit for the sacrifice. So, people had to purchase animals from *inside* the temple area. But animals bought *inside* the temple courts were sold for a much higher price. Annas, and his clan, pocketed the excess, and added to their wealth. (Kind of like what you have to pay for concessions when you go to a major league ballpark or arena!). Jesus saw all of this, and one day He went into the temple full of anger. He took a whip and overturned the money tables, and quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, He said, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers" (Mark 11:17).

Can you imagine the rage this must have generated with Annas and his family! Their whole system of greed and corruption was being challenged by Jesus! It's not surprising that right after Jesus does this, it says, "And the chief priests and the scribes sought a way to destroy him, for

they feared him" (Mark 11:18).

So they waited for a chance to nab Jesus. With some help from Judas, that moment came in the Garden of Gethsemane. Roman soldiers and temple police came out in full force – weapons and all – seized Jesus, bound Him, and hauled him off to Annas. Now, having heard these things about Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas, the high priest, do you think Jesus had any chance for a fair trial? That would never happen!

So John writes: "First they led him to Annas" (John 18:3). Annas, the power behind the scenes, wanted to be the first to get a shot at this prized prisoner Jesus! "Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching" (John 18:19). This in itself was illegal. Jewish law prohibited that kind of direct questioning that might incriminate a suspect. *Everything* about Jesus trial was illegal. It took place at night, and the early hours of morning. It was highly unusual for a prisoner to be brought to the high priest's personal residence.

Jesus knew it was illegal to ask Him direct questions like Annas did. This is reflected in Jesus' response: "Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said'" (John 18:20-21). With that, one of the officers slaps and scolds Him: "Is that how you answer the high priest?" (verse 22). Jesus responds: "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" (verse 23). Annas' encounter with Jesus ends, as he sends Jesus on to his son-in-law, Caiaphas, the current high priest.

*Jesus...and Annas...*I've thought a lot about this encounter, and what implications it may have for us. Someone has remarked that both were religious men. Both claimed to be servants of God and the people. But the difference in them is like day and night.

Annas represented organized religion. He had once been high priest. Not just some local rabbi in a small village, but the *high priest in Jerusalem!* The *spiritual head* of Israel! He is a Zadokite, descended from a line of priests dating a thousand years back to King David. Yet, instead of serving the people, Annas controlled a religious organization filled with greed and vice, intent on maintaining the status-quo. He headed a religious system so decadent that it lynched and murdered God's Son!

It's hard for me to look at Annas, and not think about what organized religion can become. Organized religion is *not bad* in itself. A lot of people are against organized religion. "Oh, I believe, but I don't go to church! I don't believe in organized religion." But what's the alternative to a faith system that's organized? *Disorganized* religion? Do-it-yourself faith, shaped just how you prefer it? Biblical faith is *never* just individuals doing their own thing, believing what they choose in isolation from others. It's being organized around a *community* of faith: Israel in the Old Testament, the Church in the New Testament. I'm not against organized religion! Frankly, I have little regard for those who claim to be Christians, and reject being part of any faith community.

But I've seen organized religion and the institutional church at times, at its worst: promoting a patriotism that borders on idolatry, justifying racism, making television preachers into multi-millionaires, restricting the ordained ministry and church leadership to males, quietly giving in to consumerism and materialism, denying the civil rights and humanity of gay people.

Here are some questions to ponder. *Is the church like Annas, or like Jesus?* Like Annas - motivated by self-interest, desiring ease and comfort? Or like Jesus – willing to give our congregational life away in service to others?

Is the church an agent for change? Or does it preserve and bless the status quo? Does organized religion help preserve the good life for a select few, or work to make sure that everyone in our society gets a fair shake?

Is the Jesus we worship a cultural Jesus, or the biblical Jesus? A few years back *World Vision* magazine featured an article by Tony Campolo called, "Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?" Tony's words are just as provocative and penetrating today as they were when the article was written. He writes: "Our society has taken Jesus and recreated him in our own cultural image. When I hear Jesus being proclaimed from the television stations across our country, from pulpits hither and yon, he comes across not as the biblical Jesus, but as a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Republican...a Jesus who incarnates only what we are, rather than a Jesus who incarnates the God of eternity, is not the Jesus who can save."

He goes on to relate how the biblical Jesus says, "Come, learn of me. And then be like me...to follow the biblical Jesus is to do exactly what he would do in your circumstances." He continues: "Nothing is more controversial than to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Nothing is more dangerous than to live out the will of God in today's world. It changes your whole monetary lifestyle...you've got to buy what Jesus would buy, you've got to dress the way Jesus would dress...our culture has conditioned us to want more and more stuff we don't need. It's time to repent of our affluence."

The religion of Annas loved wealth and power and the good life and wanted to keep it all to themselves. The religion of Jesus wanted to change things so that all people could have access to material and spiritual blessing.

Jesus confronted evil and injustice head on. When we say "Jesus came to save souls," at best this is a half-truth and distorts the real Jesus! James D. Smart wrote a provocative book called *The Cultural Subversion of the Biblical Faith*. He pointed out something he claims is deeply entrenched in American Protestantism. It's that so much preaching limits itself to what's termed the "spiritual life, the inner life, the qualities of Christian character, the availability of spiritual resources for living." These are important, he notes, but "where they monopolize our concern and leave no room for the more dangerous kind of preaching in which we spell out the implications of the Christian faith for the controversial issues that confront our members as citizens of the community, they produce a defective, corrupt and unbiblical gospel."

He says the marks of a prophet are all over Jesus' ministry – and if Jesus had confined Himself just to "saving souls" He probably could have gone on with it for years, and never would have been condemned to die on a cross. It was when Jesus confronted the evil embodied in the religious-political dynasty of Annas that a price was put on Jesus' head! (*Think about that, and let it sink in!*).

The cultural subversion of the Christian faith. That was a tough book for me, at least, to read and take to heart. The natural style of my ministry and preaching is to focus on personal salvation, the inner life, helping people grow spiritually, overcoming personal problems, and the like. That's my bent, my feel-most-comfortable style. When I first felt a call to the ordained ministry, I sensed a call to be an evangelist, to win people to Christ. But over the years I've had to be reminded again and again that, as important as that is, it's not the whole gospel message. If we're going to be like Jesus, we have to address not just the personal side of our faith, but the *public* component – to confront the social and moral problems that affect society as a whole.

A well known journalist and political commentator, a Roman Catholic, recently remarked on the sermons he hears when he goes to mass, how they just seem to be irrelevant to the issues we are facing today.

Frankly, I've gotten very little criticism and flak over the years when I've preached personal salvation and spiritual growth. But times when I've tried to relate the gospel to some of the *public issues* tearing the world apart, I've often taken some heat. For instance, during the years when nations were building up a tremendous arsenal of nuclear weapons, I spoke out against this in one church, and a man got angry and left the church. I'm not into public demonstrations, and often just think, "Don't these people have anything else to do? Don't they have jobs, or families?" But I once joined other pastors in our local ministerium for a vigil in front of the courthouse in Media, PA. President Reagan was meeting for peace talks, and we clergy were just standing there *praying* as a public witness. During the hour or so I stood there, people walked by and made hostile remarks, or were rude. And we were just there praying!

If Jesus had come to earth, not when He did, but *now*...in our lifetime...what do you think He would say? What would His preaching and teaching be like? What would He say to world leaders? If He made a trip to Washington, what would He do and say? What would He say to Republicans? What would He say to Democrats? What would He say about Isis and Hamas? About immigration? Government spending? Abortion? Healthcare? Would He even come to the U.S., or would He be conducting His ministry in one of the poorer, third world countries? If we can ever get a grip on what Jesus would be doing, that's what Christians and the Church should be doing!

Jesus confronted the aging, slick politician-priest Annas, and lost His life as a result. He didn't stand much of a chance once He took on the self-serving religious system entrenched in Jerusalem. Annas won. For Jesus, it was on to Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, Herod, then back to Pilate, and on to a cross. So much for confronting the powers of this world!

Oh, by the way, Annas is mentioned one more time in the bible. Know where? It's in the fourth chapter of the Book of Acts.

"The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?'" (Acts 4:5-7). A bunch of Jesus followers were running around all over Jerusalem with a newfound explosion of power and joy! They were boldly spreading the word that Jesus was alive again, and they were performing miracles in His name.

Annas got rid of Jesus. But Jesus came back to life, went back to heaven, and filled His followers with His own Spirit and power! And now Annas had to deal with that!

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