

“Are You the Son of God?” (Luke 22:63–71)

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Most of you know that I am a fan of C. S. Lewis, the British author who was active in the middle of the twentieth century. He is best known for *The Chronicles of Narnia* books, but he was also an Oxford professor of literature and he wrote many books on Christianity. Though I’m a fan of his, I don’t always think he was right. In one short essay, he writes about talking to modern audiences. He talks first about adjusting his language to his audience. But he says the greatest difficulty he has in communicating to modern audiences is the fact that they have no concept of sin and guilt. I agree with that up to a point. We tend not to think of ourselves as sinners, but we sure do like to judge other people for their sins.

But then Lewis writes this: “The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. . . . Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.”¹ His point is that since we don’t think ourselves guilty, we don’t have a problem sitting in judgment on God. It used to be the other way around. People used to assume they were guilty and would be judged by some god or other. But now, at least in our minds, the tables have been turned.

I understand his point, and there may be some truth to it. But the fact is that humans have judged God for quite some time. The first human beings made a judgment about God, though they probably didn’t think through that judgment very carefully. They judged that they knew better than God, or that God wasn’t good, and his word wasn’t trustworthy. There are times in the book of Job where Job seems to be judging God. But, far more clearly, almost two thousand years ago, man did put God in the dock. The Son of God was put on trial. And that is the greatest irony. The One who will judge the world was judged.

Today, as we continue to read the Gospel of Luke together, we’ll see Jesus on trial. We’ll see that the One charged with blasphemy is actually blasphemed. We’ll see that Jesus is mocked for being what people assume to be a false prophet, and in that process, his prophecies come true.

We’ll begin by reading Luke 22:63–65. Just as a reminder: Jesus has been arrested away from the crowds in Jerusalem, his disciples have fled, and Peter has denied knowing him. He has been brought to the high priest, for what was probably an initial inquiry, to decide how a trial

¹ C. S. Lewis, “God in the Dock,” in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 244.

would be conducted. And, in the meantime, we're told what happens to Jesus while he is in custody.

Here is Luke 22:63–65:

⁶³ Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him. ⁶⁴ They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" ⁶⁵ And they said many other things against him, blaspheming him.²

Jesus is beaten, mocked, and blasphemed. Luke downplays the physical abuse that Jesus received, but the other Gospel writers make it clear that Jesus was slapped and struck by many guards (Matt. 26:67; Mark 14:65). Later this morning, though Luke doesn't mention it, Jesus will be scourged (Matt. 27:26; Mark 15:15).

The guards mocked Jesus because they didn't believe that he could be a great man of God. I'm sure they didn't believe that he was the Messiah, or Christ, the anointed King of Israel who was supposed to come and defeat Israel's enemies and rule with justice and righteousness. Jewish people must have thought that such a king would be powerful. Here is this common-looking man who was arrested. Jesus must have appeared rather weak. He probably didn't look very Messiah-like in their eyes. I'm sure they thought the idea that Jesus could be divine would have been laughable. In the eyes of Jewish people, God could never be a human being. And if that were possible, surely God wouldn't come as a carpenter from Nazareth. He would be royalty, dressed in the finest garments, raised in the palace in Jerusalem, wearing a crown and commanding an army. Jesus didn't appear to be royal or divine.

But we're told here that Jesus is mocked for being a prophet. The guards cruelly put a blindfold on him, and then they hit him. If Jesus is a true prophet, he would know which guard hit him. Now, Jesus was recognized as a prophet. In fact, some thought that he was the Prophet that Moses had promised would come and would speak the words that God gave to him (Deut. 18:15–18; John 6:14; 7:40). But the guards didn't believe that. What's interesting is that the guards, in mocking Jesus for being what they considered a false prophet actually proved Jesus' prophecy true. Earlier, Jesus had said this to his disciples:

"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. ³³ And

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” (Luke 18:31–33)

It is ironic that in mocking Jesus for being a false prophet, the guards prove Jesus to be a true prophet. And this is one of many ironies that occurs throughout Jesus’ trials. We often misuse the word “irony.” Many people use it as a synonym for “coincidence.” But irony does not mean a coincidence. Irony can be understood as a gap between what is being said and what is true. One dictionary definition of irony is “the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning.”³ Another definition is: “incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result.”⁴ That’s the Alanis Morissette definition. Here’s one more definition: “incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play.”⁵ We, the readers of Luke, understand the truth. Jesus is a true prophet. But these guards don’t know it. Yet their mocking proves Jesus’ prophecy is true. “Isn’t it ironic, don’t you think?”

Another irony is that though Jesus will be charged with blasphemy, these guards are the ones who are blaspheming him. Blasphemy isn’t a word we use often. One definition is: “the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God.”⁶ That’s what these guards are doing. By treating the Son of God in this way, mocking him and beating him, they are showing their hatred for God and their lack of reverence to him. Another definition is: “the act of claiming attributes of deity.”⁷ That’s what the Jewish leaders believe Jesus is doing. And he is. He claimed to be divine. That’s wrong if you aren’t God. But if you are God, then claiming to be divine is simply telling the truth.

And that leads us to see what happens when Jesus is on trial. Luke gives us one version of Jesus’ trial. Matthew and Mark show that while it was still dark, Jesus was on trial in the high priest’s house (Matt. 26:57–68; Mark 14:53–65). Luke tells us that later he appeared before the whole council, probably the Sanhedrin, which was the high court of the Jews. The council had 71 members, including the high priest, elders, and various teachers of the law. These men would decide what to do with Jesus.

³ *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

Let's now read Luke 22:66–71:

⁶⁶ When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes. And they led him away to their council, and they said, ⁶⁷ “If you are the Christ, tell us.” But he said to them, “If I tell you, you will not believe, ⁶⁸ and if I ask you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹ But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” ⁷⁰ So they all said, “Are you the Son of God, then?” And he said to them, “You say that I am.” ⁷¹ Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips.”

Now, God is in the dock. Or, to be more specific, the Son of God is in the dock. The first thing Jesus is asked is if he is the Christ. Christ is based on the Greek word for “anointed.” It has the same meaning as Messiah, which is based on the Hebrew word for “anointed.” The anointed one in question is the promised son of David, one of the greatest kings of Israel. God promised David that he would have a descendant who would reign forever (2 Sam. 7:12–13). Prophets told that this king would defeat Israel’s enemies and bring justice and peace forever (Isa. 9:6–7; 11:10). If Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, that would not necessarily be blasphemy. But if he was the Messiah, that would mean he is the authority, and not these men judging him. If Jesus were lying about being the Messiah, he could at least be charged with misleading people. But if he’s telling the truth, then the issue is a political one.

What’s interesting is that Jesus doesn’t say, “Yes, I’m the Christ. If you knew your Bible well, you should be able to see that.” Instead, he says, “If I tell you, you will not believe.” Whatever Jesus says, these people have their minds made up. Even if he told them the truth, they wouldn’t believe him. And that says something powerful about the human heart. We think we can put God on trial. A friend of mine who is not a believer recently found out that his mother has cancer again. He was very upset. He said something like, “If God is real, he has to show himself to me.” What he meant is that God must heal his mother. God owes it to my friend to demonstrate his existence by healing his mother. Let’s assume that his mother’s cancer disappears. Would my friend really believe? I doubt it. He would probably say the chemotherapy worked. He would credit science with the healing. For some people, even if God were to perform miracles, or appear in the flesh and speak to them, that would not be enough. They still wouldn’t believe.

And the reason why is not one of evidence. The Bible says that simply by living in God’s world, we have enough evidence to know that God exists (Rom. 1:20). The issue is authority. We

don't want God to be our King and Judge. We sometimes want him when we're in need, but we don't want him to be our leader, to dictate how our lives should go. Thomas Nagel, an atheist who was a philosophy professor at New York University, once wrote, "I want atheism to be true and am uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."⁸ He then says, "My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition."⁹ He admits that the reason he didn't want there to be a God is because he doesn't want a "cosmic authority" over him, telling him how to live.

I think those statements reflect our rebellious hearts. We want to be in charge. We want to be on the throne. This is nothing new. This has been the way humanity has been since the first human beings thought that they could become like God and turned away from him, which led to all the misery and suffering that we find in this world (see Gen. 3).

Of course, Jesus knows this. So, he doesn't play along with the council's line of questioning. But though he doesn't answer their question directly, he does answer it by showing them the authority that he has. He says, "But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God." Jesus often used "the Son of Man" as a title to refer to himself. It comes from a prophecy in the book of Daniel. In Daniel 7, Daniel has a vision of someone "like a son of man" who appears before God's throne and receives "dominion and glory and a kingdom" (Dan. 7:13–14). Even that title, if understood correctly, shows that Jesus viewed himself as someone who receives the greatest authority from God. But here, Jesus says that he will sit at the right hand of the power of God. That means that he will have all the power of God. He will be God's right-hand man. This concept comes from a Psalm that talked about the coming Messiah. In Psalm 110:1, David says,

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

That Psalm goes on to speak of this Lord, the Messiah, as one who will "shatter kings on the day of his wrath." He is the King who will judge all other kings.

⁸ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

This claim that Jesus makes leads the council to ask a follow-up question: “Are you the Son of God, then?” The question about whether Jesus is the Christ is really a political one. This question is more of a religious one. We’re not told why they ask this question. But in John’s Gospel, Jesus refers to God as his Father and frequently speaks of himself as the Son. Sometimes kings were referred to as sons of God. Even Adam is called “the son of God” by Luke (Luke 3:38). But the way that Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of God” makes it clear that he and the Father share the same divine status. Again, that’s clear in John’s Gospel. And in John’s Gospel, we’re told that such claims were why the Jewish leaders wanted to kill Jesus. For example, when Jesus implied that he and God the Father did the same work, John says, “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because . . . he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God” (John 5:18; cf. John 10:30–33).

So, the question is really, “Are you the unique Son of God, God’s divine agent?” Or, “Are you equal to God the Father?” Or, “Are you Yahweh?” And Jesus simply says, “You say that I am.”

Jesus could have said, “Yes. I’ve been trying to tell you that in many ways and you wouldn’t believe.” But he doesn’t do that. He says, “You say that I am.” He’s not denying the charge. But he’s reinforcing the idea that they know what his claims are. They know he has claimed to be the Son of God. If they only would believe Jesus was telling the truth, if they would submit to his authority, they could be in the right with God. But they don’t do that. Their understanding of Jesus’ claims and their rejection of Jesus’ claims will lead to their own condemnation.

In John’s Gospel, shortly before this episode, Jesus says something very important. This is what we read in John 12:44–50:

⁴⁴ And Jesus cried out and said, “Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. ⁴⁵ And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. ⁴⁶ I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. ⁴⁷ If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸ The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. ⁴⁹ For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. ⁵⁰ And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.”

Jesus came to earth to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). He came as light, to show us our true condition and to show us the way back to God. He spoke words given to him by God the Father. If people would only trust in his words and trust in his actions and trust him, they would be saved from sins and condemnation. They would not remain in darkness. But if people reject Jesus, they are rejecting God. And Jesus' words will judge people. When Jesus says, "You say that I am" to these Jewish leaders, it is an act of judgment. These leaders knew what Jesus was claiming, and they rejected him. You could say that their own words will judge them. Though they thought they were judging him, ironically, it is Jesus who will judge them. Though they thought they were in power, it was Jesus who was about to ascend to the throne of God. Ironies abound.

When Jesus answers, the Jewish leaders are convinced that Jesus has committed blasphemy. He has done something worthy of death. So, they will send him to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, because they did not have the power to carry out the death penalty.

Though Jesus has been arrested, mocked, beaten, blasphemed, and will soon be sentenced to death, he is still in control. Jesus could have saved himself from all of these things. He could have called upon legions of angels to destroy these people. But Jesus didn't do that. The one who is the true authority came under the authority of these faithless people. The one who will come again to judge the living and the dead allowed himself to be judged. The one who was blasphemed allowed himself to be charged with blasphemy. He did this to pay for our sin.

In God's economy, sin does deserve death. Sin is nothing less than rebellion against God. It is rejecting him and his commands. It is rejecting his authority. Sin is putting ourselves in God's place. We may not see ourselves to be sinners. But if we're honest, all of us have failed to love each other the way we should. We have been selfish and greedy. We have not always been honest. And we have failed to love God, which is a grave sin because God is our Creator. He sustains our existence at every moment. He has given us everything that we have. Therefore, we owe God everything. Yet we give God so little—so little time, so little thought, so little love, so little obedience. God has every right to judge us guilty and to remove us from his creation.

We may not feel that we have mocked God or put him in the dock, but every time we don't obey God, we are basically saying that we know better than God. If we were first-century

Jews, we might act just like these guards and the Sanhedrin. “Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers”—that’s what we’ll soon sing.¹⁰

But God is gracious. He gave his only Son to rescue us from our sin. It is amazing that Jesus would do this. He is the God who “sits in the heavens [and] laughs” at the nations who rage against him (Ps. 2:4). But he is also the God who allows himself to be mocked. He is the judge of the world, who allows himself to be judged. He is the immortal God who allows himself to die. And he asks us to come to him in faith.

If you don’t truly know Jesus yet, if you act as though you were on the throne, I urge you to place your trust in Jesus. There will be a day when he comes again. And he will judge us. All of us will have to give an account of our lives to him. Every knee will bow before him, every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, but only some will be cleared of their guilt. Anyone can be forgiven their greatest sins if they would only confess them to Jesus and trust that he is King, that he is Lord, that he is God, and that he has died for our sins. Jesus’ death wasn’t an accident. He laid down his life to pay the death penalty that sin deserves. Anyone who comes to him in faith will never be condemned. Sinners can be clean, the guilty can be declared innocent, and God’s enemies can be God’s family. Isn’t it ironic, don’t you think?

¹⁰ Stuart Townend, “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us.”