

BE ASSURED OF GOD'S SOVEREIGN CONTROL

18 ¹²So the band [of soldiers together] with the chief captain and the officers of the Jews, seized Jesus and bound him. ¹³They first brought him to Annas; for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. ¹⁴Now Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it would be to their advantage if one man should die on behalf of the people ... ¹⁹The high priest asked Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. ²⁰Jesus answered him, I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and in private I spoke nothing [different]. ²¹Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I spoke to them; look, they know what I said. ²²When he had said this, one of the servants who was standing nearby, struck Jesus with his hand, saying, Do you answer the high priest in this way? ²³Jesus answered him, If I have spoken evil, testify concerning the evil; but if I have spoken the truth, why do you strike me? ²⁴Then Annas sent him, [still] bound, to Caiaphas the high priest. (Jn. 18:12-14, 19-24)

14 ⁵³They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes assembled together with him. ⁵⁴Now Peter had followed [Jesus] at a distance, [going] even as far as entering into the courtyard of the high priest. He sat there among the servants, warming himself in the light [of the fire]. ⁵⁵Now the chief priests and the whole council sought evidence against Jesus so that they might put him to death; but they could not find any. ⁵⁶Many [people] gave false testimony against him, but their testimonies did not agree with each other. ⁵⁷Then certain men stood up and bore false testimony against him, saying, ⁵⁸We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, [one that is] made without hands. ⁵⁹But not even then did their testimonies agree with each other. ⁶⁰Then the high priest, standing in the midst [of the assembly], asked Jesus, Do you have no response? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you? ⁶¹But he kept quiet and made no reply. Again the high priest asked him, Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed [One]? ⁶²And Jesus said, I am; and you shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven. ⁶³Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, What further need have we of witnesses? ⁶⁴You have heard the blasphemy; what do you think? And they all condemned him as being worthy of death. ⁶⁵Some [of them] began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him, and demanded, Prophecy! Then, as the servants took him [away], they beat him. (Mk. 14:53-65)

22 ⁶⁶At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, were assembled. Then they brought him into their assembly, and said, ⁶⁷If you are the Christ, tell us. But he said to them, If I tell you, you will not believe; ⁶⁸and if I ask [you], you will not answer. ⁶⁹But from now on, the Son of man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God. ⁷⁰So they all asked, Are you then the Son of God? And he said to them, You [correctly] say that I am. ⁷¹Then they said, Why do we need any more testimony, for we ourselves have heard it from his own mouth? **23** So the whole assembly rose and brought him before Pilate. ²They began to accuse him, saying, We found this man subverting our nation, and forbidding [men] to pay taxes to Caesar,

and claiming that he himself is [the] Christ, a king. ³So Pilate asked him, Are you the King of the Jews? And he answered him, You are [correct in] saying [so]. ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, I find no basis for any charge against this man. ⁵But they became all the more insistent, saying, He incites the people throughout all Judea with his teaching, beginning from Galilee all the way to here. (Lk. 22:66-23:5)

Introduction

The upheaval actually began on April 15, 1989, touched off by the death of a former Chinese Communist Party leader. When he died some Beijing students treated him as a martyr, pouring into the streets to demand democracy and reform. By May 13, about one thousand students had begun a hunger strike in the center of Beijing at a place called Tiananmen Square.

As the weeks passed, the student protesters were joined by railway workers, coal miners, factory workers, and peasants. By Wednesday, May 31, more than one million demonstrators jammed the streets of Beijing, and the number of hunger strikers at Tiananmen Square had grown to three thousand; by now the protests had spread to some thirty-four other Chinese cities.

For seven weeks the world marveled at the restraint exhibited by both the Beijing government and the thousands of demonstrators who occupied Tiananmen Square. But then it happened. Beginning in the early morning hours of Sunday, June 4, Communist China experienced the worst day of bloodshed in its history. One Beijing student summed it up: We saw evil ... and it horrified us. (*WORLD*, 2/3/90, p.6)

The night that is described for us in the fourteenth chapter of Mark can even more accurately be identified as the manifestation of pure evil. Jesus Himself described it as the hour that belonged to the power of darkness. Speaking to the mob and the Jewish leaders who came to take Him into custody, the Lord Jesus declared, *“this is your hour, and [that of] the power of darkness”* (Lk. 22:53.) But even when confronted with such an hour as this, we may have confidence in God’s sovereign control over all things, recognizing that He even employs the evil strategies of His enemies to accomplish His own divine purpose.

As we consider the trial of our Lord Jesus Christ, this is the great truth we must come to appreciate: We may be assured of God’s sovereign control over all things, and the certainty that He will cause His divine purpose to be victoriously accomplished despite all opposition.

I. Be Assured of God’s Sovereign Control, Even When Evil Asserts Itself

Mark 14:53 indicates that in the middle of the night Jesus was led away to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest, where there awaited Him a hastily assembled meeting of the Sanhedrin. John informs us (Jn. 18:13) that although Caiaphas was the high priest, it was Annas, his father-in-law, who actually presided over this

inquisition. Annas was “the godfather” of political and religious authority and corruption in Israel.

According to John 18:19, the high priest questioned Jesus about His disciples and His teaching, hoping that perhaps Jesus might reveal something incriminating. No formal charge was brought against Jesus; on the contrary, His enemies sought to make Him incriminate Himself. This whole process was illegal. It was the responsibility of the accusers to bring charges against the defendant and to produce witnesses; it was not the defendant’s responsibility to demonstrate His own innocence (Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary, The Gospel of John*, p.755)

According to John 18:21, Jesus responded by challenging the high priest to question His hearers themselves about His teaching. Failing in their attempt to have Jesus incriminate Himself, and being sensitive to Jesus’ charge that His accusers must produce witnesses against Him, the Jewish leaders now proceed to a formal trial (Jn. 18:24.)

Now the counsel sought to produce witnesses against Jesus (Mk. 14:55;) even resorting to false witnesses: *“Now the chief priests and the whole council sought false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put him to death”* (Matt. 26:59.) The counsel is not interested in truth and justice, their sole concern is their desire to eliminate Jesus; they now look for some pretext or justification to carry out their crime.

But they are unable to produce even two false witnesses to suit their purpose. Many false witnesses came forward, but no two of them were in agreement (Mk. 14:55b-56.) The counsel is finally able to produce two witnesses who testify that Jesus spoke against the temple; but even then their testimony did not agree, and the chief priest failed to get Jesus to respond to their charge (Mk. 14:57-61.)

As we consider the trial of the Lord Jesus Christ we see evil asserting itself. Here is the effort of self-serving, evil men to murder the one truly innocent man—and to do so by means of the legal system that was intended by God to promote justice by condemning the guilty and acquitting the righteous. But even when evil asserts itself, be assured of God’s sovereign control.

II. Be Assured of God’s Sovereign Control, Even When Evil Appears to Be in Charge

Frustrated once again, the chief priest must seek yet another approach in his effort to bring a charge against Jesus, a charge that would merit the death penalty. The chief priest now demands that Jesus Himself take the witness stand and under oath answer the question, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?” (Mk. 14:61b.)

Having been put under oath and being directly asked to confirm or deny His true identity, the Lord Jesus affirms the truth: *“Jesus said, ‘I am; and you shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven’”* (Mk. 14:62.)

Upon hearing Jesus’ reply, the chief priest demonstrates his prejudice against the Lord (Mk. 14:63.) Without weighing the evidence for or against Jesus’ claim, he arbitrarily accuses Jesus of speaking blasphemy: *“Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, He has spoken blasphemy!”* (Matt. 26:65a.) He determines that there is no further need of producing witnesses, he takes Jesus’ testimony as being self-incriminating: *“Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy”* (Matt. 26:65b.) Having interpreted Jesus’ testimony as blasphemy, the chief priest declares the members of the counsel to be witnesses and calls upon them to render the appropriate sentence: *“You have heard the blasphemy; what do you think?”* (Mk. 14:64a.) According to Mark 14:64b, the counsel unanimously delivers a guilty verdict, and with mocking contempt they turn Jesus over to the temple guard for imprisonment (Mk. 14:65.)

As we consider the trial of the Lord Jesus, evil appears to be in charge: the chief priest and the counsel have contrived to bring an accusation against the one innocent man, using His own righteous testimony to condemn Him to death. But even when evil appears to be in charge, be assured of God’s sovereign control.

III. Be Assured of God’s Sovereign Control, Even When Evil Appears to Triumph

According to Mark 15:1, very early the next morning another assembly of the Sanhedrin was convened for the purpose of officially passing sentence against Jesus. According to Jewish law, a prisoner could not be sentenced on the same day as his trial (*The New International Commentary, The Gospel of John*, p. 747.)

Then from Luke 22:66-71, we learn that there was a re-enactment of the trial that had taken place the previous night. This was a necessary formality, for no session of the Jewish Council was regarded as valid if held during the night (Norval Geldenhuys, *The New International Commentary, The Gospel of Luke*, p.587 and footnote, p. 589.)

Having officially passed sentence against Jesus, they now bound Him and brought Him before Pilate, the Roman governor (Mk. 15:1b.) The reason they did so was due to the fact that the Jews did not have the authority to carry out the death penalty, as we learn from their testimony before Pilate:

So Pilate came out to them and asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?” ³⁰*“If he were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed him over to you.”* ³¹*Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by*

your own law.” “But we have no right to execute anyone,” the Jews objected. (Jn. 18:29-31)

It is bitterly ironic that the Jewish leaders testify, *“We have no right to execute anyone,”* as they seek to murder, by means of the legal system, a innocent man.

Before Pilate, the chief priests accused Jesus of many things, including inciting the people to revolt, in their effort to convince Pilate that He should be sentenced to death: *“They began to accuse him, saying, ‘We found this man subverting our nation, and forbidding men to pay taxes to Caesar, and claiming that he himself is the Christ, a king’”* (Lk. 23:2.) Note that the charge against Jesus is altered from blasphemy, (a criminal offence under Jewish law,) to revolutionary activities, (a criminal offense under Roman law.)

The Jewish leaders succeeded in stirring up the multitude of the people to demand Jesus’ crucifixion and they finally succeeded in getting Pilate to acquiesce in handing Jesus over for crucifixion:

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds that they should ask for Barabbas, and have Jesus put to death. ²¹Then the governor asked them, Which of the two would you have me release for you? And they said, Barabbas. ²²Pilate said to them, What then shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ? They all said, Let him be crucified. ²³But he said, Why, what evil has he done? But they cried out vehemently, Let him be crucified. ²⁴So when Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but rather that a riot was developing, he took water, and washed his hands before the crowd, testifying, I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man; you see to it. ²⁵And all the people responded, Let his blood be upon us and upon our children. ²⁶Then he released Barabbas for them; but Jesus he scourged and handed over to be crucified. (Matt. 27:20-26)

As we consider the trial of the Lord Jesus, it appears that evil has triumphed: the Jewish leaders have gained the support of the crowds (the very crowds who a few days earlier greeted Jesus as the promised Son of David) and have coerced the Roman governor to condemn this one truly innocent man to death (Pilate himself declaring Jesus’ innocence.)

But even when evil appears to triumph, be assured of God’s sovereign control. Listen to the prayer and the divinely inspired testimony of the early church:

*Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸**They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.** (Acts 4:27-28)*

The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ was the very means appointed by God to gain victory over the devil and provide for our salvation:

*Christ ... forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵And having **disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.** (Col. 2:13-15)*

Conclusion

As Christians, we must remember that God sovereignly used the greatest act of evil (the mock trial and crucifixion of the Lord Jesus) as an instrument in His hand for the accomplishment of our salvation.

And He may sovereignly choose to employ similar acts of evil for the promotion of the gospel, as the Apostle Paul testifies concerning his own imprisonment for Christ and the gospel:

Now I want you to know, brothers, that the things that have happened to me have [actually] resulted in the advancement of the gospel. ¹³It has become evident to the whole Praetorian guard and to everyone else that I am a prisoner for Christ. ¹⁴Furthermore, [due to my imprisonment,] many of the brothers have become much more confident in the Lord, taking it upon themselves to speak the word without fear. (Phil. 1:12-14)

A most dramatic example in recent times is the unexpected result of the evil perpetrated at Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989, (as reported in *WORLD* magazine, 2/3/90:

During the last half of 1989 thousands of Chinese students and intellectuals turned to Christianity. Their interest in the Christian faith can be traced directly to the violence and evil perpetrated the previous June by the Communist government at Tiananmen Square.

When the Chinese government put down the pro-democracy movement with unconscionable ferocity and cruelty, China's students saw two truths clearly for the first time—and these revelations set them on the road to Christianity. They saw that the Chinese Communist Party could not be trusted; the system's violent core had been exposed and, consequently, its credibility was gone. Second, and even more importantly, the students saw the manifestation of evil operating in and through people; this experience was the radical opposite of all they had been taught—all Chinese religion for the past 5000 years, as well as Communism, had taught that man was basically good and only circumstances made him bad.

But the brutality witnessed at Tiananmen Square had little to do with circumstances: the pro-democracy movement had just about come to an end. Should the government resort to violent atrocities, the loss of trade and prestige with the West could have been catastrophic. Nevertheless, the Chinese

government chose to resort to violence, and that against peaceful, unarmed fellow countrymen, indeed, against the youth who were the very future of the nation. As one student stated, “We saw pure evil in June, and it horrified us.”

Sobered by the carnage, and disillusioned by the system that permitted it, the students looked to religion; but which religion? They could not turn to the Chinese religions, because, as one student phrased it, “they were based on a premise we (now) knew to be untrue—that people are morally good.” Another student testified, “I turned to Christianity because it seemed the only realistic religion; ... it told us we have evil tendencies, but this evil could be conquered.”

“If those bullets had been rubber, we students would never have gone through the nightmare and trauma that has brought a Christian revival among us.” So it was that the very day in which evil asserted itself and even appeared to triumph, God sovereignly used it to turn many to Christ.

As we witness the world around us—or when we ourselves are personally victimized by the evil perpetrated by men and by the devil himself—let us be assured that God, by His sovereign power and control, shall cause His will and His good purpose to be victoriously accomplished: *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, those who have been called according to his purpose”* (Rom. 8:28.)