

LENT 3
ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
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**“GOD ON TRIAL”
#3 – TESTIMONY**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Years ago, barely out of high school, I found myself being sworn in as a witness in a court of law. Up to this point in my life, the most public speaking I had to do was to give a couple of oral book reports and to debate some topic on which I wasn't even remotely interested. I'm sure I ended up getting some of the details wrong in each of those occasions, but this was different. I was in a court of law, being called as a witness for the defense. I had to swear before God that I would tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God.

The case wasn't about some well-known crime. Not even a second was dedicated to it on the evening news. You see, I happened to witness an automobile accident that was really, just a fender bender. The guy who was clearly at fault was arguing that the other driver was the one at fault. He pulled out in front of her, but he claimed it was because her lights weren't on. I was behind him, so I had a front row seat to the whole metal twisting, plastic snapping event. Her lights were on.

So, the lawyer for the other driver began his questions:
Can you state your full name for the record?

Dwight Franklin Gantt, Jr.

Can you state your occupation?

Full time college student and part time pizza delivery driver.

Can you state your age?

18...

As the lawyer began asking the questions that actually related to the car accident, I began mulling over my previous answer. I was actually 19 years old. My birthday had occurred just a few weeks ago, which means I had just lied... in a court of law. How could any of my testimony be considered reliable from that point on? I panicked. I didn't know what to do. So while the lawyer was in mid question, I blurted out, "I'm sorry. I just lied. I'm actually 19." The judge assured me that my momentary lapse in memory brought on by nervousness wouldn't cause the rest of my testimony to be called into question, so long as I told the truth.

Turns out, I was the only eye-witness to the accident, and on the basis of my testimony the judge declared the guy who pulled out in front of the other driver to be at fault, precisely as the responding officer had noted.

I relay all of this to you today to introduce the next installment of the series we began a few weeks ago called: God on Trial. Today, we're going to get into the heart of the trial, which, of course, is the testimony.

The portion of the Bible that relays to us the testimony of the trial we've been considering the past few weeks is found in the first book of the New Testament, called Matthew. It's chapter 26, first verses 57-66:

ESV Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. (58) And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. (59) Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, (60) but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward (61) and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" (62) And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" (63) But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." (64) Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." (65) Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. (66) What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death."

According to the transcript just read, there was all kinds of testimony going on in this trial. First of all, there is the testimony that was being requested by the court officials, known as the Jewish Sanhedrin. This court was made up

of religious leaders such as priests, the high priest, and the elders. These people considered Jesus to be a fraud who was deceiving the people. They wanted very badly to get rid of Him, so they used the law against Him. That's why we're told that they were actually suborning false testimony against Jesus. Of course, those who offer false testimony as well as those who go looking for it are both equally guilty of perjury. That's the way this trial was conducted.

Trial, of course, is a generous term. Kangaroo court is more the truth. The only accusation with any degree of merit against Jesus was something Jesus had actually said, that after they destroyed His body He would raise it again three days later. Ironically, this testimony against Him was a prophecy that they were in the very process of fulfilling.

Now, suborning perjury is bad enough. What the high priest did next was even more reprehensible. In US jurisprudence, we have a constitutional amendment that specifically states that no person can be forced to testify against Himself. It's part of the 5th Amendment. That amendment that we all treasure actually originated in the Jewish legal system from the days of Jesus. Jesus could not be required to or even allowed to testify in His own defense. Yet, the leader of the Sanhedrin, the high priest, was breaking the law by calling Jesus to testify at His own trial.

That means on two specific counts the rules of the legal system were being violated – suborning perjury and

demanding the defendant testify against Himself in His own trial.

It's interesting, then, that Jesus, who mostly remained quiet throughout the whole trial, decided that this would be an appropriate time to give His testimony. When the high priest put Him under oath and asked Him if He was, in fact, the Son of God, Jesus answered calmly, firmly, and honestly: I AM!

"I AM!" That's the English translation of the name of God. In the Hebrew, it's Jehovah, sometimes pronounced Yahweh. In English, it's I AM. Jesus wasn't just testifying that He is the Son of God. He even went so far as to declare, for the whole court to hear, that He is Jehovah. Jesus is claiming to be the eternal God. This is important as we will see in a few minutes because...

All this time another trial of sorts has been taking place. Not an official one, but an informal trial – one to which almost all of us can relate. It's the court of public opinion. It's relayed to us in the succeeding verses of the same chapter of Matthew:

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." (70) But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." (71) And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." (72) And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." (73) After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of

them, for your accent betrays you." (74) Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. (75) And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

One of Jesus' closest associates – the disciple known as Peter – was sitting with the servants and soldiers of the high priest to watch what was going to happen to Jesus. What transpired there in the courtyard of the high priest's palace was another prediction or prophecy of Jesus.

As Peter sat among all those different people, some of them began to put two and two together. At first, it was just a servant girl, asserting that he was also with Jesus. Peter denies it. Then another servant girl makes the same assertion. Again, Peter lies. Finally, someone notices some unique about Peter – circumstantial evidence, but definitely corroborating evidence – Peter's Galilean accent gave him away. He really was one of Jesus' disciples. As if to misdirect their attention, Peter begins cursing and swearing to emphasize his denial of any relationship with Jesus at all. According to him, he didn't even know who Jesus was.

What was Peter afraid of? Well, that's not too hard to decipher. Only yards away was Jesus, on trial for His life. If Peter were proven to be one of Jesus' associates, the same might happen to him. He simply wasn't willing to take that chance or to walk that path, no matter how

vehemently he had claimed he would early that very evening.

In a sense, Peter was putting God on trial every bit as much as the Sanhedrin was that night. No, he wasn't questioning Jesus' claim to be God. Instead, he was trying Jesus' faithfulness to him in the face of his faithlessness toward Him. He wasn't accusing Jesus of blasphemy. He was accusing Jesus of not being able to keep His promise: whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.

We do the same thing, when you think about it – put God on trial – in all kinds of ways. Aren't we putting God on trial – trying His patience – when we violate the speed limit and other laws which our God-given authorities have established for our protection? Aren't we putting God on trial when we abuse our bodies – trying His protection and care – with all kinds of substances, ranging from foods to inebriating drinks and drugs? And aren't we especially putting God on trial when we use our mouths in church to sing God's praise only to use the same mouths to deny any relationship with Him by cursing, swearing, and speak all kinds of selfish and angry and filthy words?

Now let me ask you: How should God react in the face of our treatment of Him? How would you react? Probably the same way I would if one of my acquaintances treated me like they don't love me or like me or even know me. I would probably turn my back on them and say "Good riddance. I don't need fake friends."

What does Jesus do, though? He turns and looks at Peter. It's not a "I'm disgusted at you, Peter" look. It's not a "I'm

shocked that you would do such a thing” look. It’s not even a “I’m somewhat disappointed in you” look. It’s the look of love and faithfulness and friendship. His face, covered with saliva from those who spit at Him and probably with some drops of blood from being punched and backhanded, was more concerned for Peter than for Himself. He didn’t want Peter to lose His connection to Him, not for His own sake but for Peter’s sake.

Jesus has precisely the same concern for you, too. This Jesus who was so vehemently mistreated and lied about and nailed to a piece of wood, who so lovingly looked at Peter in the midst of actually being mistreated and put to death, is the Great I AM God who looks upon you with the same love. He wants you to stay connected to Him – yes, even though you have denied Him time after time by the poor choices you have made and the sins that you have committed. He wants you to see Him taking all of your wounds, all of your stripes, all of your sin to Himself and taking them all away from you forever.

When that love, friendship, and forgiveness of Jesus becomes the defining testimony in your heart, something strange happens. You start speaking with an accent that gives you away, too. What I mean, is that you will find people recognizing you to be one of Jesus’ disciples who speaks words of forgiveness, love, and friendship. And it won’t just be words, it’ll be actions – the kind of self-sacrificing actions that Jesus performed for you. AMEN!