The Charge of the Light Brigade and Jesus' False Trial

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Date: 07 June 2020

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0:00] Turn with me this morning to Matthew chapter 26 and verses 57 through 68. Matthew 26 verses 57 through 68.

On October the 25th, 1854, 600 men of the British Light Brigade charged up a valley to take a Russian artillery position at the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimea.
They were successful in their mission, but they suffered terrible losses in the process because the Russian artillery occupied not just the head of the valley, but the heights on either side also.
And yet so gallant was their action that the British Light Brigade became the cause celebre of the famous English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson.
And he wrote a poem which has become even more famous than he. It's seared into the national consciousness of Great Britain. As I was thinking through Matthew's account of the trial of Jesus here in Matthew 26, I couldn't help but reflect on how Jesus was engaging on a mission somewhat similar to that of the British Light Brigade at Balaclava.
[1:24] But I also noticed that whereas despite the gallantry of the individual British trooper, the charge of the Light Brigade was really a military disaster, the gallantry and bravery of Jesus in face of his accusers led to the greatest victory the world has ever seen.

Yes, even his death on the cross and his resurrection on the third day. And so I want us to understand this, the four stages of this sham trial of Jesus at the hands of the Sanhedrin under the four most famous lines in Tennyson's famous poem about the charge of the Light Brigade.
First of all, into the valley of death rode the 600, where we'll think through the lie of the land and who was present at Jesus' trial. Secondly, theirs but to do or die, where we'll think through Jesus' silence in the face of his accusers.
Thirdly, canon to the right of them, canon to the left, where we'll see the violent reaction of the religious leaders and their immoral judgment of Jesus.
And lastly, into the mouth of hell rode the 600, where we'll begin to access the great sufferings of Jesus as his torture commences.
[2:54] It's the gallantry of the British Light Brigade which shines through their actions at Balaclava.

It's the gospel of Jesus Christ which shines through his actions on that fateful Thursday evening in Jerusalem. A gospel which is entirely as effective in saving us from our sins today as it was on the day Jesus died.
First of all then, from verses 57 and 58, we begin with, Into the valley of death rode the 600. Into the valley of death rode the 600.
The valley of Balaclava was somewhat three-sided. Russian gunners held the heights on all three sides and they were able to fire down on the Light Brigade as it charged against the batteries at the head of the valley.
Many will have heard of the charge of the Light Brigade, but only very few will know why the Crimean War was being fought in the first place and who was fighting who.
[4:08] But what happened on the Thursday night of Passover week was far cleaner. On one hand you have Jesus, the Jesus who has been seized and arrested by a mob armed with swords and clubs.

He has been roughly taken from the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives to the palace of the Jewish high priest Caiaphas. Jesus stands there alone, surrounded by the mob and being looked down upon from the balcony by Caiaphas and by the other religious leaders of Israel.

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Jesus, the Son of Man, King of Heaven, stands alone against the very people who should be bowing down to worship him.
We can't quite relate to the ugly violence of this scene. To use modern language, Jesus has been jumped and he's now standing before a lynch mob.
Never has a man been braver than Jesus because he stands here alone. His disciples have fled. Peter has fallen from a distance and he's now sitting down beside the guards at the gate of that courtyard.
[5:32] But he's not standing there or sitting there as Jesus' advocate and Jesus' friend. In the Hollywood film Spartacus, when the victorious Romans gathered up their defeated enemy, they ask, which one of you is Spartacus?

One by one, the men rise and say, I'm Spartacus and I'm Spartacus and I'm Spartacus. But when Jesus stands against his enemies, he stands alone.
How grateful we are for the grace of Christ. For though he stood alone with none to defend him against his enemies, yet he promises us that he will never let us stand alone against our enemies. That he will never leave us nor forsake us. That he'll never sit by the gate of the courtyard while we're in trial. He'll be with us when our knees are shaking and our strength is altogether gone.
Peter left Jesus and sat down by the gate to see what would happen. But in a few weeks' time from this passage, Peter stands before the same Sanhedrin defending his Christian faith and Jesus stands beside him by the power of his Holy Spirit.
[6:59] Against the British Light Brigade were ranged the guns of the mighty Russian army. They occupied the heights on all three sides of that valley at Balaclava.

They were a formidable enemy. Ranged against Jesus was first of all this bloodthirsty mob. These dogs who answered to their masters, the chief priests.
They held swords and knives and gloves. They weren't afraid to use them. Then there was Caiaphas, the high priest himself.
The other gospel writers paint him as being a very cunning man, but very far from being devoted to God. For him, being high priest was all about the exercise of control and authority.
Imagine this man. On paper, he is the spiritual descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses. The same Aaron who erected the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai and commanded the people of Israel to bow down and worship it.
[8:12] Like father, like son. For the spiritual son of Aaron this night engages in the same rebellion against the God of Israel.

Imagine, imagine this. Aaron standing in judgment on the God of Sinai. Caiaphas standing in judgment on the God of Israel who stands before him.
It's absurd. And he charges Jesus with blasphemy. It's absurd. gathered there like a troop of baboons.
That's the word for it. Are the teachers of the law and the elders of the people those same people who earlier had plotted against Jesus? What's the collective noun for a group like this?
If you have such a thing as a murder of crows, then perhaps here we can call them a murder of religious leaders. Because their hearts and minds were set on only one thing.
[9:22] Murder. Here he is, Jesus. He stands alone surrounded by hundreds of hostile faces. Powerful men in politics and religion.

Powerful men in military and physical terms. and he stands against them alone. No wonder then we say of him. Into the valley of death rode the 600.
Second, from verses 59 to 63, there's but to do or die. There's but to do or die. The primary mark of the British Army has always been its discipline.
Led by highly trained officers, the fighting man did what he was told, even if what he was told made no sense to him. It must have seemed that way when Lord Cardigan, commanding officer of the British Light Brigade, commanded his men to make their way up the valley.
The ordinary lancer could see that there were guns to the right of him and guns to the left of him. There were guns up front, but he did not buckle under the absurdity of the command.
[10:41] He mounted his horse and he obeyed his orders, riding forward to death. The average lancer who made up the British Light Brigade would not have known that the order that was given to Lord Cardigan was a mistake.

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And that the man who had given it to him had changed it deliberately out of his own personal madness. Later on in his famous poem, even Lord Tennyson realized that the order to charge had been a blunder.
But in praise of the gallantry and bravery of the British Lancers, he wrote, there's not to question why, there's but to do or die.
And perhaps a blunder can be forgiven. But what cannot be understood is that from the very beginning of this trial, the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could kill him.
Let's face it, even corrupt legal systems don't go out to look for false witnesses. witnesses. I can see bewilderment among the legal minds of our fellowship because here we have a courtroom which in fact has no interest in the truth at all.
[12:06] There is no principle of habeas corpus. There is only the principle of self interest. They don't want to hear the truth. They want a lie.

And so they go looking not for reliable witnesses, but for hoodlums who are willing to lie for a bribe. And they find them. Two men come forward and give them the false evidence they've been looking for.
They say, this fellow, that's Jesus, said, I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days. Well, I guess if you decided to cobble together the different things Jesus said, you could just about make the charge stick.
But let me tell you, you'd have to be a seriously creative writer. The truth they're telling here is not the truth at all. It's the part, it's probably parts of truth stitched together in some kind of Frankenstein lie.
It's the kind of deceit we see from the gutter press today. But the religious leaders had what they wanted and needed, false evidence against Jesus.
[13:19] And you want to say to Jesus, Jesus, tell them it's a lie, that you never said that. Caiaphas says to Jesus, are you going to make no answer?

What is this testimony these men are bringing up against you? What's the point in saying a word when the court isn't interested in the truth, but only in deception?
Of course, if Jesus had wanted to destroy and rebuild Herod's temple in three days, he could have done it. But that was never the kind of temple he had ever been interested in. So he stays silent.
He will not speak a word before his accusers. Just like that sheep spoken of in Isaiah 53, who is led like a lamb to the slaughter, that sheep which before her shearers is silent.
So that sheep which does not open its mouth, but meekly accepts its fate. fate. To all the world, Jesus silences madness.
[14:25] He does not even defend himself against the most blatant of lies. But then he didn't need to. The truth will always out, always.

The resurrection of Jesus was all the vindication he ever needed, God's true acceptance. And I wonder sometimes whether we need to be more silent in the face of our accusers.
Whether sometimes the better path for us to follow than defending ourselves would be to silently put our faith and trust in God and to rest in him that he will out his truth.
That he will tell the truth, that the truth will out. Better that we don't tarnish the reputation of the gospel by aggressively stooping to the level of our accusers.
Better perhaps that we imitate the Jesus who knew why and yet his was to do or die. Third here from second part of verse 63 to verse 65, cannon to the right of them.
[15:45] Cannon to the right of them. As I said, this valley at Balaclava in the Crimea was three-sided with the Russian guns occupying the heights to the right and to the left and at the head of the valley.

No wonder then did Tennyson sum up the charge like he did. Cannon to the right of them, cannon to the left of them, cannon in front of them, volleyed in thunder, Tennyson wrote.
For the Lancers, it was a living nightmare. As they approached the head of the valley, the Russian gunners stopped firing cannonballs and started firing nails.
It was a bloody mess of horse and human flesh and there was no way out as the ring of guns tightened around them. Let me ask you a question.
Have you ever heard anything quite so absurd? That Caiaphas, standing in judgment over the Son of God, says to him, I charge you under oath by the living God.

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[16:50] Have you ever heard anything quite so absurd? Doesn't Caiaphas know that the living God he is calling Jesus to swear by is standing right in front of him?

If it wasn't quite so pathetic, it would be funny. How absurd this man Caiaphas thinks he is really so important as he stands there accusing God himself.
And he says to Jesus, well tell us if you're the Christ. Tell us straight if you're the Son of God. You ever interrogate God? Shine light into his face?
Tell us the truth about yourself? I simply won't do given that Jesus has already given us all the answers we ever needed. Tell us as if they didn't already know who Jesus really was.
They had all the evidence of his mighty works and his mighty medicals. Do you ever interrogate God and treat him in this way? You be careful if you do because he's already given us all the evidence we would ever need of his love and grace toward us.
[18:07] Well the Gospel of Matthew begins with the words, a record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Its high point is reached in Matthew 16 where Simon Peter, having been asked by Jesus, who do you say I am, replies, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Now here he is, challenged by the religious authorities of Israel, challenged face to face, are you the Christ? The beginning, the middle and the end of the Gospel of Matthew unmistakably declares Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.
During our studies in Matthew's Gospel we have consistently agreed that the title Christ comes closest to King. Jesus Christ means Jesus the King or King Jesus.
And here they are, these tinpot rulers standing proudly before their king. They should be on their knees bowing before him in worship, these Lilliputians before their Gulliver.
However, from every direction they direct their guns of false accusation in the face of Jesus.
[19:34] He's the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. If it had been headed before them they'd have showed him respect. If it had been the Emperor of Rome standing before them they'd have shaken in their sandals.

but before them this day stood the Lord himself, the King through whom the world was created, the King who's always been the great shepherd of his people.
And Jesus says to them, yes, it is as you say. notice here the directness in Jesus' speech. It is precisely as you have said, that he's the Christ, the Son of the living God, and they've said this with their own lips.
The day is here in part, but will yet come in full when men and women from all over the world shall say that Jesus really is the Christ, the Son of God, and they shall bow down before him as their Savior and their King.
But for now at least, many are like Caiaphas. They say it with their tongues, but they are very far from Jesus in their hearts. And then Jesus goes on to say, in the future, you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of the heavens.
[21:12] Ah, through the fog of deceit and lies, finally the truth. Who do these religious authorities think they are kidding? They knew that the Son of Man was Jesus' favorite name for himself.

Matthew 25 is dominated by the future vision of Jesus as the divine judge, rewarding his faithful people and punishing the unrighteous.
And now Jesus is driving deep into the snake pit called the Sunhedrin. And he says to them, it's not you who are going to have the final say. You can do what you like to me, but I shall sit at the right hand of God, the Mighty One, and your eyes shall see me there.
And the next thing you'll see after that will be the Son of Man that you have crucified but now exalted high, coming on the clouds of the heavens to judge you.
Canon to the right of them, Canon to the left of them, Canon to the front of them, volleyed and thundered. Yes, like a troop of baboons from every direction, they hurled their accusations at Jesus and he was silent but with a volley of his own, he destroyed them.
[22:46] Whatever action they shall now settle upon, it shall be an act of regicide. They shall be murdering their own king. Jesus stands there alone with a bravery and a confidence born from his being the loving son of his loving father.

Would you be willing to stand up for Jesus as the Christ? Perhaps not to a being crowd. Thankfully, perhaps we'll never have to do that.
But maybe more importantly, are you willing to stand up for Jesus as the Christ in the face of your own personal doubts, the sins that you're tempted to commit?

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No, we shall stand. We shall. Even as our Lord stood by his grace, even though there were cannon thundering all around him, he's with us.
And his grace will always be sufficient for us. And then finally, from verses 66 through 68, into the mouth of hell rode the 600.
[24:07] Into the mouth of hell rode the 600. As that valley floor at Balaclava became filled with smoke and the cries of the dying, it must have seemed to the onlooker that the 600 Lancers of the British Light Brigade were riding into hell itself.

Well, that's the way Tennyson put it. Out of the 600 men of the Light Brigade, only 250 made their way back to the British lines.
heavy cavalry, they had reached their target, they had knocked out the guns at the head of the valley, but unsupported by the British heavy cavalry, they were forced then to retire.
But what kind of hell that must have been for them as they experienced the onslaught of these hundreds of Russian artillery pieces from every side of the valley? And here in Matthew 26, we see an enraged Caiaphas.
paroxysm of anger, tearing his clothes and condemning Jesus. Blasphemy, blasphemy, he cries. Blasphemy, Caiaphas.
[25:18] Blasphemy. It's blasphemy only if it's wrong, Caiaphas. And Jesus isn't wrong. He is who he says he is, Christ, the Son of God.

Nevertheless, the rest of this troop of baboons begin to hysterically bay for the blood of Jesus. He is worthy of death, they cry. Well, were they ever going to come to any other conclusion?
A few days previous, when Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem, the people had praised him and shouted, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. But now they call for his blood.
On the eve of the Passover, when Israel celebrated the death of their Passover lambs, they're now condemning Jesus to die. Think of Jesus himself.
He'd used these wonderful hands of his to reach out and touch a man with leprosy. And he'd held these two fish and five loaves in these hands.
[26:27] And he'd held out these hands and he'd lovingly blessed the crowds who had gathered to hear him preach him. And he'd used his mouth to speak the words of truth and tell the people of Israel that their heavenly father loved them.

But now the hands of his enemies are clenched into fists as they strike him, their hands slapping him and their mouths spit into his face.
the horror of Golgotha's suffering has begun as Jesus' suffering, willingly accepted in Gethsemane's garden, begins to be meted out.
He said he would bear the wrath of God, he would drink the cup of God's wrath to its very dregs.
And now the mob hit him again and again and again.
He is beginning to ride into the mouth of hell. In just a few short hours from this point because of the judgments of this sham court he shall hang on a Roman cross condemned as a criminal.
[27:41] He shall die there for their sins. With such love his face covered with their bruises and covered with their spittle and yet even then he'll cry out father forgive them.

They don't know what they are doing. And yes God shall forgive us but only because he punished his own son in our place.
For so many years I stood with this mob laughing at Jesus' claim to be Lord. I laughed at his weakness. but when I saw the cross and the Lord himself opened my heart to what Jesus was doing there dying for my sin I laughed no longer.
Rather I called out for his forgiveness and he freely granted my request. What was true for me over 30 years ago can be true for you today if you will but see the bruised battered face of Jesus covered with the spit of his enemies and realised that it was for you the king was being crucified.
It was for you. The thing about the charge of the light brigade is that though it may have been a gallant blunder in the long term it brought Russia to its knees and resulted in victory for Great Britain and our allies.
[29:19] And so we ask as we close why should I put my faith and trust in Jesus Christ? Because your pastor can't just do. No.

Because the Jesus who stood alone before all his enemies while they lied about him will one day stand before you surrounded by 10,000 times 10,000 mighty angels and he'll tell the truth about you.

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That's all the more reason now to ask for his forgiveness and to pledge your life and loyalty to him. Let us pray.
Lord, we recognize that even the most gallant and brave acts of the greatest of men pale into insignificance before the greatest act of bravery and courage we have ever seen.
That Jesus Christ, your beloved son, who himself is God the son, willingly allowed himself to be struck on the face by the fists and the palms and the spittle of wicked men.
[30:44] That he willingly allowed himself to be lied about. If ever there was a time, O Lord, where we need to be silent, perhaps, Lord, it is in the face of the great suffering.

We just need to pray and keep our faith in you. We pray for all who have heard this message today and who remain unaffected. Lord, open their hearts to the truth of who Jesus is.
We pray that you would show them the gospel of Jesus in which they can find forgiveness. we ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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