

Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him.

There is a poem written by William Ernest Henley in the latter part of the 1800s titled "Invictus"—Latin for "Unconquered." In the poem the writer hurls his defiance at what he calls "*the bludgeonings of chance*" and "*the menace of the years,*" very pleased with himself for not wincing or crying. He ends the poem with the words, "*I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.*"

Many people think this poem is quite courageous and inspiring. You can imagine the speaker on the deck of his ship, sailing through the storms and tempests of this life, navigating through the treacherous and tumultuous waters, following his own will, and bravely marking out his own way. No one else will set his course. No one else will command his soul.

Caiaphas, the high priest of the Jewish nation, and the members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Israel, probably had not spent much actual time on the deck of any ship. But they thought of themselves as great navigators, nonetheless. It was their task to keep their people safe and afloat on the tossing seas of empires. This was no small challenge! It would take all the wits and all the wisdom they had to keep little Judea from being swallowed up and disappearing beneath the waves, as had happened to so many other nations. But they were accomplishing it, and they were proud of themselves for it.

And in all of that they forgot who the true master of Israel was and condemned him to death when he came before them. And although we might never have gone along with this great crime, we still are tempted by the same pride and arrogance that led Caiaphas and the others. And so we must pray to God:

Forgive Our Desire to Defy Your Divine Authority!

Let me tell you how the high priest of the Jewish nation got to be the high priest of the Jewish nation in the days of Jesus. It took political skills. The Romans, when they had conquered the country, had decided that so high an office as the high priesthood was not something they wanted out of their control. So the governor of the province was the man who would decide how to fill the office, and he had one overriding concern about candidates: make sure it is someone who could keep the peace and keep the taxes coming in.

Caiaphas' family members would end up in the office of the high priesthood for about one hundred years because they knew how to "play the game." Caiaphas knew how to spot and exploit the slightest weakness in the Roman governor's position. He knew how to keep the streets of Jerusalem relatively peaceful. He enjoyed all the perks of the position, including a grand house in the better part of town. And he gladly wielded the power of the high priesthood and would allow no rivals.

But Jesus of Nazareth was a thorn in his side. The man traveled throughout Israel preaching and teaching, which would have been all right except for one problem: He kept on talking about the Jewish leaders' hypocrisy and false teachings. Jesus was saying that the priesthood had abandoned the pure laws of God and had substituted them with the traditions and foolishness of man-made laws and opinions. And Jesus kept performing all these miracles and getting everybody all worked up about himself. Every wonder he performed made him look better to the people and the priests look worse. **"See, this is getting us nowhere,"** some of the higher-ups had complained. **"Look how the whole world has gone after him" (Jn 12:19).**

So the high priest and his council, the Sanhedrin, had to go to work. They had to do something to lessen the influence of this preacher from Galilee. They sent out their colleagues and cronies to trap him in a misstatement and ruin his popularity with the people. That failed again and again. They confronted him directly on the day he rode into town with palm branches all over the road. But Jesus wouldn't back down. So they plotted his death. They bribed one of his disciples to betray him to them for 30 pieces of silver. They held a travesty of a nighttime trial and condemned him. They brought him to the Roman governor and demanded that the governor execute him. And when Pontius Pilate set up a placard on his cross to show what crime he was dying for, the priests protested loudly, but to no avail. What an insult for Pilate to write *"The King of the Jews"* above the head of the man they had utterly rejected. Not him! They would not have him rule over them! They would have nothing to do with his "authority"!

And that was the trouble right there. They didn't want to yield the control they had over Israel. They didn't want to yield their power to any Messiah. While the rest of the people of Israel were delirious at the thought of their heavenly King coming to them, the high priest and his comrades could imagine no worse disaster for themselves. They were like the enemies of the Lord's anointed in the second Psalm: **"Let us break their chains, they say, and throw off their fetters" (verse 3).** They alone were the captains of the ship of Israel!

And there is not one of us who would willingly and consciously join them in this blasphemous defiance. You see, that is the insidious thing about sin and temptation: It never shows itself as it really is, not in ourselves. We can see it clearly in others. We can see it in Caiaphas and in the Sanhedrin. But can we see it when it rears up in our own hearts? Is there not, at times, a feeling that Christ's authority is too much of a burden for us? His laws are not always what we want to do, after all. Our sinful flesh sometimes rankles at the idea that we don't get to call all the shots for our own lives.

There are times when those commandments of his are more than we feel like bearing. And then we look for ways around them, ways to cut a few corners, ways to find some special circumstances that will allow us to ignore the clear laws of our God.

Yes, we must all admit that there are times when we defy the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ and turn to things we know he has forbidden or ignore doing the things we know he has commanded us to do. These are not those iniquities we fall into through weakness or thoughtlessness. These are acts of rebellion against our King at those moments when our human nature just plain doesn't want him to be our King—those times when we want to be the masters of our own fates and captains of our own souls.

And suddenly there we are, sitting in the council chamber of the Sanhedrin with Caiaphas presiding—or us presiding in his place. But we can't condemn Christ to a Roman cross as Caiaphas did. We condemn him to the backseat of our lives, out of sight and out of mind for the moment, while we do what we want to do and refuse to listen to him whom we call our Lord and King. And if we continue like this, then we will soon cast him out of our lives as surely as the high priest and his minions cast him out of their nation.

Of all the people for us to be allied with! The members of the Sanhedrin who cast Jesus Christ out of the fellowship of Israel because they would not have him in authority over them! They preferred to see him die on a Roman cross than to spend another minute listening to him and his words and commands.

But before we find ourselves so firmly set in their midst that we can't find the door out of that hideous chamber, we have to stop and think about what we are doing and what we are saying and who it is we are imitating. And then we need to fall to our knees and pray, *“Father, teach us, for Jesus' sake, to submit to your and his authority!”*

God help us remember that we really are not fit to be the captains of our own fates or the pilots of our own souls. Have we forgotten how surely we will bring our ships to wreck and ruin if we start navigating? We are sinners, born in sin and living in it all our days. What sort of moral or ethical sense within ourselves can be our chart and compass when, as Scripture says, no good thing is found in our sinful flesh?

We can see the shipwrecks that people make of their lives when they try to sail according to their own charts. They set their own rules. They make their own designs for the way life ought to be lived. And, in the end, they bring only sorrow and pain, if not to themselves then to the others they ram and sink in their mad desire to live free of every rule but their own.

It was to save us from such ruin and disaster that God's Son came to this earth and submitted himself to the authorities of the Jewish nation and of the Roman Empire. But more than that: He submitted himself to the authority of the divine law, which we so often throw aside. He submitted himself to the condemnation and death that we earn for ourselves.

Christ did not allow us to set sail for eternal ruin and regret and punishment. He surrendered himself to the power of the wicked men who wanted to end his kingship once and for all. He allowed a Sanhedrin to try him and a Caiaphas to condemn him to death. Through this death he paid the price and penalty for our many and constant refusals to live under the authority of his commandments.

Jesus saved us from our headlong rush away from God and set us once again on the course that God, in his love and wisdom, had ordained for us from the beginning and revealed clearly in the pages of his Holy Word. Now that we know the price he paid and the damnation from which he saved us and the heaven to which he is guiding us, why would we ever entertain the thought of further mutiny?

Jesus Christ is the pilot of our lives. He and he alone is the captain of your soul and mine. Yes, we know that his commandments are sometimes hard to live by. We live in a sinful world and are pursued by the roaring lion who seeks to devour us. How could we imagine that living a Christian life would be a walk through a garden? Temptations will not cease, and again and again the world and the devil and our own sinful nature will tell us we are being fools. But Jesus gives us strength.

It may indeed be that we will be giving up much that the world finds quite pleasurable. Is that too great a price to pay to show our gratitude to him who died to make us the children of God and citizens of the heaven? He gave his life that we should belong to him and live in his kingdom and serve him. Will we throw that aside? Will we try to fool ourselves, as the high priest did, into believing that we know better than God what is right and what is wrong or what direction we should go and what paths we should avoid?

Remember what St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians: **“He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Co 5:15)**. Try to throw off his authority? Why? His authority is the most precious and important thing in a Christian’s life!

“Master of my fate”? “Captain of my soul”? There is One and One alone who can truly make that claim for any of us, and it is not ourselves. It is the One who paid the great price to make us his own so that we might live under him in his kingdom and, as Luther so eloquently put it, *“serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”*

Let us bow our heads and pray,

Father, forgive us when we forget this and seek to deny your Son’s divine authority! Make us right in your sight by the blood of your Son. Give us innocent hearts that truly seek to live by your commands. And teach us the blessedness of knowing Jesus Christ as our Savior and of living under his authority as our King. Amen.