

EARLY IN THE WEEK

THE KING COMES FOR HIS KINGDOM

SUNDAY–TUESDAY

The year was AD 33.¹ The excitement in the cool spring air of Jerusalem was palpable. Thousands of Jewish pilgrims had gathered from around the world for the upcoming Passover feast, and word had spread that Jesus—a thirty-something itinerant rabbi, prophet, and healer from Galilee—had raised Lazarus from the dead, had withdrawn from Bethany—a village just a couple miles east of Jerusalem—to a town called Ephraim in the wilderness (John 11:54), and was staying at Bethany during the weekend prior to Passover (John 11:55–12:1, 9–11).² Many had gone to Bethany to see Jesus and Lazarus, with the result that they believed in Jesus and returned to the capital city with reports of his miracle-working power to raise the dead (John 12:9–11, 17–18). The Passover crowds in Jerusalem were like a powder keg ready for a spark—filled to the brim with both messianic fervor and hatred of Roman rule.

Winds of revolution whipped through the air of Palestine throughout the first century, and Jesus, with his teaching authority and ability to capture the imagination of the masses, not least on account of his ability to heal and raise the dead, looked very much the part of the long-awaited Messiah. In order to gain and maintain power, the Romans could kill—which they did quite effectively—but how could they defeat a leader who could raise the dead at will?

After observing the Sabbath (Friday evening through Saturday evening) at Bethany, Jesus arose Sunday morning to enter the city of Jerusalem. It was March 29, AD 33—the first day of the last week of his earthly life.

¹ Most scholars believe that Jesus was crucified in AD 30. We are persuaded that the evidence strongly points to a date of AD 33. For an introductory discussion of the issues, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Date of Jesus’ Crucifixion,” *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 1809–10. See also Colin J. Humphreys and W. G. Waddington, “The Jewish Calendar, A Lunar Eclipse and the Date of Christ’s Crucifixion,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 43.2 (1992): 331–51.

² Many Jews came to Jerusalem a week early to ceremonially cleanse themselves and prepare for the Passover. 28 *Early in the Week*



MARCH 29, AD 33

Jesus Enters Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:29-44; John 12:12-19)

The Passover crowds and inhabitants of Jerusalem were filled with messianic expectation, and Jesus does not disappoint. On Sunday morning, Jesus and his disciples are on the Mount of Olives as they approach Jerusalem. He sends two of his followers to the nearby village (Bethphage or Bethany), instructing them to bring a donkey and colt on which he will sit for his entrance into Jerusalem. By this intentional symbolic action, Jesus will clearly communicate his kingship to the expectant crowds of Passover pilgrims by fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, that Israel's future king would come riding on the foal of a donkey, and by copying Solomon's entrance into Jerusalem when he was declared king.¹

As Jesus makes his westward descent down the Mount of Olives and toward the Holy City, the crowds rightly interpret his actions with expectant joy and respond in kind by spreading robes and leafy palm branches in his pathway to create a royal red carpet (see 2 Kings 9:13) and by acclaiming him their Davidic king:

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! (Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:10; see also Isa. 9:7)

The crowds are openly acclaiming Jesus instead of Caesar as king!

The whole city is shaken by the events, and the crowd keeps spreading the word to any in Jerusalem who have not yet heard who Jesus is (Matt. 21:10-11). Some Pharisees instruct Jesus to rebuke the crowds for their dangerous messianic exuberance, but he refuses to correct or curtail the excitement of the crowd over his entrance into the city (Matt. 21:15-17; Luke 19:39-40). It would be hard to overestimate the political and religious volatility incited by Jesus's actions—the Pharisees were taken by surprise and had no idea how to respond (John 12:19). Up to this point in Jesus's ministry, he could still have managed to live a long, happy, peaceful life, but his actions on Sunday set in motion a series of events that could result only in either his overthrow of the Romans and the current religious establishment—or his brutal death. He has crossed the point of no return; there would be no turning back. Caesar could allow no rival kings. As Jesus approaches the city, he weeps over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44).

Jesus Predicts His Death (John 12:20–36)

Some Greeks who were among the Passover pilgrims seek an audience with Jesus. John does not record the Greeks' question, but Jesus responds by predicting his death and describing it as the very purpose for which he has come into the world (John 12:27). A voice from heaven, thunderous in sound, affirms God's commitment to glorify his name through the coming death of Jesus (John 12:28–29). Jesus goes on to clarify the kind of fate he will meet: death by crucifixion (being "lifted up from the earth," John 12:32; see Isa. 52:13). Yet by his death, Jesus will deal Satan a crushing blow (John 12:31; see also Luke 10:18; Gen. 3:15).

The Jewish crowd, of course, does not like this kind of talk and objects that according to the Mosaic law, the Messiah must remain forever. Jesus does not directly answer their objection but instead commands them to "walk while [they] have the light" (i.e., Jesus himself, the "light of the world," John 8:12; 9:5) and believe in the light in order to become sons of light before it is gone and darkness comes (John 12:35–36).

Jesus Visits the Temple (Matt. 21:14–17; Mark 11:11)

Before returning with the Twelve to Bethany at the end of the day, Jesus visits the temple complex. Jesus continues to upset the religious establishment: healing the blind and lame, and receiving the praise of children.

This initial visit to the temple sets the stage for the unforgettable events that are to occur there the following day.

¹ 1 Kings 1:32–40. Matthew makes mention of two animals, a colt (the animal that would have carried Jesus) and a donkey (presumably the colt's mother; Matt. 21:7). Mark and Luke both mention only the colt and note that no one had ever ridden it before (Mark 11:2; Luke 19:30), hence perhaps the need for the colt's mother to steady it as it carried its first rider.



MARCH 30, AD 33

Jesus Curses a Fig Tree (Matt. 21:18–19; Mark 11:12–14)

As Jesus and his disciples are returning to Jerusalem Monday morning, Jesus, being hungry, spots a fig tree. Israel is often characterized as a fig tree in the Old Testament (Jer. 8:13; Hos. 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7), and Jesus's cursing of the fig tree symbolizes the judgment of God upon a nation that has the outward appearance of life but fails to bear fruit.

Jesus Cleanses the Temple (Matt. 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–18; Luke 19:45–48)

With the riveting events of the previous day still fresh in everyone's mind, all eyes are on Jesus as he enters the city Monday morning. What will the recently hailed Davidic Messiah do to bring about his kingdom? Jesus wastes no time in answering this question by going straight to the temple.

From his visit the night before, he knows exactly what he will find there—moneychangers and merchants selling sacrificial animals in the Court of Gentiles. These profiteers prey upon the religious devotion of the Passover pilgrims who must pay the temple tax with a Tyrian shekel and present unblemished animals for sacrifice. Consumed by holy zeal and righteous indignation, Jesus overturns the tables and chairs of the moneychangers, throws out merchants and customers alike, and refuses entrance to any who are carrying goods for sale. He then begins to teach the people that the temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations (see Isa. 56:7; Jer. 7:11), not a den of thieves where the rich and powerful exploited the poor under the guise of facilitating worship of God.

By these actions, Jesus directly challenges the Jewish religious leadership complicit with—and likely benefiting from—this glaring corruption of devotion to Israel's covenant-keeping God. The chief priests, scribes, and leaders of the people desperately begin looking for a way to destroy Jesus. Not only had he directly challenged Jewish authority, but the Romans needed no excuse to exercise force if there was any civil instability. In contrast, the common people love what they are seeing. Jesus is shaking things up and setting things right just as the Messiah was expected to do. At the same time, however, by cleansing the temple Jesus further seals his death sentence. Those in power will not put up with a challenge to their authority on this level. Jesus must die.

When evening comes, Jesus and his followers leave Jerusalem once again (Mark 11:19; Luke 21:37).



MARCH 31, AD 33

Jesus Teaches His Followers a Lesson about the Fig Tree (Matt. 21:20-22; Mark 11:20-26)

When passing by the fig tree Jesus had cursed the day before, and at Peter's remark that it had withered, Jesus takes the opportunity to instruct his followers to have faith in God.¹ If they do not doubt but believe, they will be able to move spiritual mountains by way of believing prayer. While praying, they must forgive others who have wronged them, so that their own sins will be forgiven by God as well.

Jesus Teaches and Engages in Controversies in the Temple (Matt. 21:23-23:39; Mark 11:27-12:44; Luke 20:1-21:4)

On Tuesday morning, the crowds come early to the temple to hear Jesus speak (Luke 21:38). Will Jesus do anything today to match the excitement of the previous two days?

The chief priests, scribes, and elders immediately approach Jesus when he enters the temple and confront him concerning his actions on the previous day: "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" (Mark 11:28). *They* are the ones who have authority over the temple and its activities, and Jesus had no right to do what he had done. Depending on his answer—and there was no answer that would satisfy them—Jesus could be arrested for his actions.

In reply, Jesus turns the tables on them by promising to answer their question if they first answer his: "Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" (Mark 11:30). The religious leaders are caught, unable to answer Jesus's simple question. If they were to say, "From heaven," the obvious follow-up would be, "Then why don't the leaders believe in Jesus about whom John testified?" If they were to retort, "From man," they would incur the wrath of the common people who hold John in high esteem as a prophet sent from God.

After thus humbling the Jewish leaders, Jesus follows up his question—the answer to which was in any case obvious to the crowds—with a series of parables. The parable of the two sons (Matt. 21:28–32) explicitly condemns the religious authorities for not believing John's message, while tax collectors and prostitutes, the most wicked kinds of people imaginable, believe and are entering the kingdom of God ahead of the supposed

spiritual leaders. This parable must have infuriated the Jewish authorities, but Jesus adds fuel to the fire with two more parables directed against them.

In the parable of the tenants (Matt. 21:33–44; Mark 12:1–11; Luke 20:9–18), the disobedient, thieving, murdering tenants clearly represent the scribes, chief priests, and Pharisees. There is nothing subtle about Jesus's telling of the parable: the religious leaders recognize the parable as having been spoken against them (Matt. 21:45; Mark 12:12; Luke 20:19).

In the parable of the wedding feast (Matt. 22:1–14), Jesus makes similar points. The current religious leadership have rejected God's invitation to the messianic wedding banquet and will be judged while the invitation is extended to all.

Jesus is clearly winning the support and approval of the people while exposing the failure and hypocrisy of the ruling Jewish leadership. The authorities, for their part, do not take this lying down and continue trying to figure out a way to arrest him; but they lack the opportunity because of Jesus's widespread popularity among the crowds (Matt. 21:46; 22:15; Mark 12:12–13; Luke 20:19–20). If they seize him, the attempted arrest would cause a riot. The leaders therefore resort to a subtler tactic and try to trick Jesus into incriminating himself by sending Pharisees (a Jewish sect known for its zeal to keep the law) and Herodians (those loyal to Herod's dynasty) to ask him a question to which either answer would provide grounds to accuse him: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (Matt. 22:15–22; Mark 12:13–17; Luke 20:20–26). If Jesus answers yes, he would shatter people's expectations of him as a Messiah who would throw off Roman rule; if no, he could be arrested for fomenting revolt. The temporary alliance of the Herodians and Pharisees (Jesus's political and religious adversaries) clearly demonstrated that Jesus was perceived as a threat to all the existing power structures. His clever answer avoids the trap by allowing for a both/and scenario, evading the either/or dilemma posed by his foes: the denarius has Caesar's image on it; so as long as Caesar is in power, it is appropriate to pay taxes to him (of course, in the messianic kingdom Caesar's image would not be on the coinage, so there the obligation would no longer apply). At the same time, Jesus urges his listeners to give God the things that are God's; since we are made in God's image, we owe everything to him. The image of Caesar and Roman gods on coins deeply offended Jews in the first century. Yet Jesus cleverly sidesteps their trap, and the Pharisees and Herodians, amazed at his answer, are at a loss as to how to respond.

After Jesus has silenced the Pharisees and Herodians, the Sadducees (a Jewish sect that denied the end-time resurrection of the dead) step forward to test him with a tricky theological conundrum (Matt. 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–40). Their question is designed to make Jesus's belief in the resurrection look ridiculous. But by quoting God's self-affirmation in Exodus 3:6, 15–16 to the effect that he is a God of the living, not the dead, Jesus once again turns the tables on his opponents.² They marvel at his answer and, as do the others who tried to trick him, fall silent.

Now another questioner, at the instigation of the Pharisees, steps forward in order to test Jesus (Matt. 22:34–35). An expert in the law asks Jesus which of God's commands is the greatest (Matt. 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34). Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and Leviticus 19:18, calling for love of God and one's fellow man, and the following conversation leads Jesus to commend (and implicitly invite) the questioner: "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34).

At this point, Jesus goes on the counteroffensive against those who have been trying to trap him and asks them a question concerning the way in which Psalm 110:1 describes the Messiah as David's Lord: How can he at once be both David's son and his Lord? (Matt. 22:41–46; Mark 12:35–37; Luke 20:41–44). Being of Davidic ancestry posed no problem for the Messiah's being Lord, but if this ancestry was interpreted as making him *merely human*, then there was a problem. Again, the opposition is utterly confounded: "And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions" (Matt. 22:46).

Having established the inability of the Jewish religious leadership to answer Jesus's questions, Jesus launches a lengthy, scathing critique of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:1–39; Mark 12:38–40; Luke 20:45–47). He warns the crowds against those "hypocrites" and "blind guides" and pronounces seven woes of judgment against them. This full-scale verbal assault against the current religious authorities removes all doubt

concerning Jesus's intentions, agenda, and aims. He has no desire to ally himself with the current leadership; he has come to overthrow their authority and to replace it with his own. There is no way that both sides can survive the escalating conflict. It seems that either Jesus will come to assume power or face death.

Jesus Predicts the Future (Matthew 24-25; Mark 13:1-37; Luke 21:5-36)

As Jesus is leaving the temple on Tuesday evening, his disciples are discussing the size and grandeur of the buildings in the temple complex. In response, Jesus prophesies that the day is fast approaching when not one stone will be left upon another. All will be thrown down.

When Jesus and his disciples stop to rest on the Mount of Olives, his followers come to him and privately ask about the timing of his prophecy: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?" (Mark 13:4; Luke 21:7). "And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matt 24:3). The disciples' question in Mark and Luke relates to the timing of the destruction of the temple, while Matthew's inclusion of the question concerning the close of the age makes clear that the disciples did not think the temple would be destroyed until the end of time.

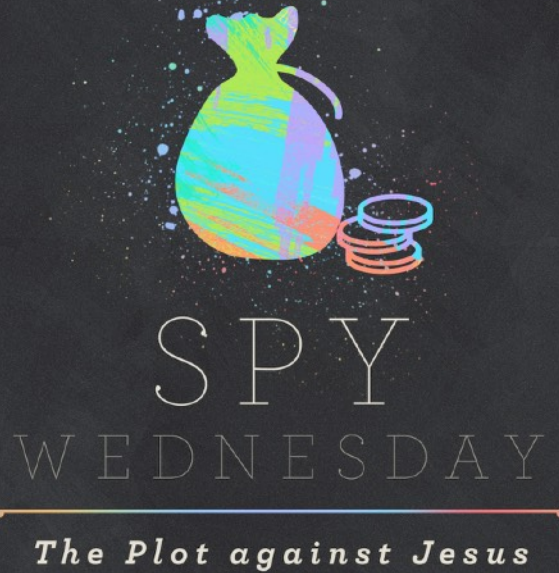
Jesus's lengthy response in Matthew, Mark, and Luke subtly differentiates the two events (though interpreters vary as to which event Jesus refers in the various parts of the discourse). It is not always clear whether Jesus is giving instructions to his disciples concerning the destruction of Jerusalem (which would take place in AD 70) or concerning his second coming and the end of the age (which was in the more distant future from the vantage point of Jesus's original followers and is still future from our vantage point today). In keeping with prophetic convention, the near event—the destruction of the temple—served as a type (picture or foreshadowing) of the worldwide divine judgment that will come upon the earth at Christ's return. The main themes of Jesus's discourse, reinforced by the parables of the ten virgins and of the talents, are clear. Followers of Jesus will experience increasing persecution and tribulation leading up to the final day of judgment, but they must remain vigilant and persist in faith.

Conclusion

With this overview of the early events of Passion Week in mind, we have a good foundation for our closer look at Jesus's final days. The stage is set for the final act. The characters are in place. Their goals, motives, and intentions are clear. The king has come for his kingdom and has issued a clear and direct challenge to the reigning structures of political, economic, and religious power. The drama can end in only one of two ways. Either Jesus will topple the reigning powers and establish his messianic kingdom—or he will be killed. No one at that time could possibly comprehend that in God's mysterious plan, there was a third option.

¹ Note that Matthew simply telescopes the events whereas Mark indicates that the cursing of the fig tree occurred on Monday while Jesus's instruction took place the following day.

² Jesus likely cited a passage from the Pentateuch because the Sadducees derived doctrine only from the five books of Moses. *Tuesday (March 31, AD 33)* 43



APRIL 1, AD 33

THE PLOT AGAINST JESUS

Jesus continues his daily teaching in the temple complex.

LUKE 21:37-38

And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him.

The Sanhedrin plots to kill Jesus.

MATTHEW 26:3-5

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

MARK 14:1-2

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people." 48 **The Final Days of Jesus**

LUKE 22:1-2

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death, for they feared the people.

COMMENTARY

Jesus's Daily Teaching

Wednesday passes quietly—particularly when compared with the earlier city-shaking events of Sunday (the Triumphal Entry), Monday (the cleansing of the temple), and Tuesday (temple controversies). Jesus continues his daily practice of traveling from Bethany to Jerusalem early to teach the people in the temple complex. There do not seem to be any recorded controversies, but Luke notes the rapt attention of the crowds who had come to hear Jesus teach. His authority, actions, and teaching have made him quite a celebrity in the eyes of the people.

Not everyone is friendly, however. Jesus has a contingent of powerful and determined enemies.

The Plotting of the Sanhedrin

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each describe the murderous plotting of the chief priests, scribes, and elders of the people “two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread” (Mark 14:1). Matthew informs us that this meeting took place in the “palace” of Caiaphas the high priest (i.e., his private residence; Matt. 26:3).¹ This elite group of Jewish leaders is representative of the Sanhedrin (though the text does not indicate that the entire Sanhedrin met at this time). They gather to brainstorm a way to kill Jesus by stealth in order to avoid a major uproar among the masses. The general consensus is that they must wait until after the Feast of Unleavened Bread (a weeklong festival ending on Nisan 21 [Thursday, April 9]), when the crowds would disperse and return to their homes away from the city. At this point, they would be free to arrest and kill Jesus without fear of inciting a revolt. They are willing to bide their time because they know—or think they know—that they are in positions of power and authority and that if they wait for the right time to dispense with Jesus, they will win in the end.

Their mind is made up, and their verdict has been rendered

¹ “Palace” may suggest a monarch’s residence but in the present context refers to Caiaphas’s home. *Wednesday (April 1, AD 33)* 49



APRIL 2, AD 33

PREPARATIONS FOR THE PASSOVER

Jesus instructs his disciples Peter and John to secure a large upper room in a house in Jerusalem and to prepare for the Passover meal. MATTHEW 26:17-19, LUKE 22:7-13

COMMENTARY

In Jewish reckoning, a new day began at nightfall, so Wednesday nightfall to Thursday nightfall (Nisan 14) was the day of preparation for the Passover meal. The Passover meal itself—including roasted lamb, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, fruit sauce, and four cups of wine—would have been shared after sundown that evening, Nisan 15 (Thursday nightfall to Friday nightfall).¹ In the original Passover, the blood of the lambs had been applied to the homes of the Israelites in Egypt to protect them from the outpouring of God’s judgment upon the Egyptians (Ex. 12:7, 12–13, 22–28).²

Matthew alone records Jesus telling his disciples, “My time is at hand,” on the morning of the day on which the Passover lamb was sacrificed (Matt. 26:18). Jesus knows that he is about to die, but his disciples and the original hearers consistently fail to grasp the reality of Jesus’s predictions. They likely understand his claim in light of their own version of messianic expectations: he is about to force the ultimate confrontation that will lead to his victory over the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman overlords.³ But Jesus means that the time is at hand for him to be sacrificed as God’s Passover lamb in order to atone for the sins of the entire world.

According to Old Testament regulations (Deut. 16:5–6), the Passover must be eaten within the city of Jerusalem. Because of Jesus’s celebrity status and the plot against him, his preparations for the Passover are conducted with a degree of secrecy. These preparations include the procurement, sacrifice, and roasting of a lamb along with the preparation of the room and side dishes. Jesus sends two of his disciples (Luke 22:8 mentions they were Peter and John) into the city to meet with an unnamed contact who will direct them to the room where they can eat the Passover. Most likely, Jesus had quietly made these arrangements ahead of time with supporters in the city. Since it was normally women who carried water jugs in that culture, the unusual

sight of a man carrying such a jug suggests that it was likely a prearranged signal, and the man with the water jug was looking for the disciples. Peter and John find the arrangements exactly as Jesus had predicted.⁴

THE FINAL PASSOVER: THE SYNOPTICS

In the evening Jesus eats the Passover meal with the Twelve, tells them of the coming betrayal, and institutes the Lord's Supper. MATTHEW 26:20-29, MARK 14:17-23, LUKE 22:14-30

COMMENTARY

On Thursday evening, Jesus and his disciples make their way to the room that has been prepared for this occasion and begin to eat the Passover meal. Each Gospel author includes different aspects of the arrangements and varying levels of detail concerning the events that took place and the words that were spoken during this final meal.⁵ The differences in arrangement do not represent contradictions but, as Matthew and Mark indicate, selective recountings of some of the things that took place “as they were eating.”⁶ This way of presenting the material does not necessarily require chronological precision but rather indicates that the words were spoken at some point during the meal. Likewise, the differences in the degree of detail surrounding the words and actions of Jesus and his followers are due to the evangelists’ theological and literary selectivity in framing their presentation. No Gospel author claims to record everything that was said or done that night. John includes the greatest amount of detail with regard to Jesus’s teaching and foot washing during the final meal and will therefore be discussed separately below.

The Upper Room

Mark 14:15 and Luke 22:12 mention that the “upper room” was large and furnished when Jesus and the disciples arrived. Most peasant houses in Jerusalem were small, with two levels but only one room. The presence of the large upper room indicates that the owner was a person of means.

Typical eating arrangements would have three padded couches arranged in an upside-down U-shape, with several participants per couch. The food and drink would be available in the center on a low table. They would recline on their left side, propped up on their left elbow, with their feet pointing outward. Eating was done with the right hand.

With this position visualized, one can understand John 13:23, 25, which describes John “reclining at table at Jesus’s chest” (our translation) and then “leaning back against Jesus.” This most likely means that John, the beloved disciple, was sitting in a place of honor to the right of Jesus, who was likely in the middle of the center couch. The fact that Jesus gives the morsel of bread to Judas makes it likely that Judas was in the other place of honor, to Jesus’s left. Since Peter motions to John to ask Jesus a question (John 13:24), it is likely that Peter is on one of the side couches opposite of John.

The Betrayer

As they are eating, Jesus makes a startling announcement: one of the Twelve, one of the men eating the Passover meal with him right then, is about to betray him.⁷ This is shocking and upsetting news to the disciples, who instantly begin trying to identify the betrayer by questioning each other (Luke 22:23) and Jesus which one would betray their Master.⁸ Jesus utters an ominous prophecy concerning his betrayer: “It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.”⁹ At that point, Judas does not foresee the end that will shortly fall upon him by his own hand, yet the announcement of doom must have sent shivers down his spine. Because each disciple is questioning Jesus, Judas likewise asks, “Is it I?” Jesus cryptically responds, “You have said

so” (Matt. 26:25). The other disciples apparently did not pick up on this clue at the time, and John records that Judas left the dinner shortly thereafter (John 13:27–30).

The Lord’s Supper

While they are eating, Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper. Luke includes some introductory words expressing Jesus’s longing to eat this final Passover meal with his disciples and his realization that he would not eat it again until the coming of the kingdom of God (Luke 22:15–18). It was the “last supper” in a number of ways: the last meal that Jesus would eat with his disciples, the last meal that Jesus would eat in his pre-glorified body, and the final Passover meal of the old covenant. Jesus was likely looking forward to this meal so intensely because he knew that his upcoming death as the true Passover Lamb would bring a fulfillment to the long centuries of Passover celebrations that had pointed forward to the Messiah’s final sacrifice for the sins of his people. The true meaning of the Passover sacrifice would soon be revealed and realized. Jesus knows that he will not engage in this kind of celebration with food and wine again until the final messianic banquet when God’s people will experience eternal resurrection life in God’s new creation.¹⁰

Jesus proceeds to utter the solemn words that are repeated each time his people celebrate the Lord’s Supper: “Take, eat; this is my body. . . . Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:26–28). “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Paul’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 testifies to the centrality of this practice in the life of the early church. The apostle introduces an additional rationale for the practice when he argues that “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). In this way, the celebration of this ordinance looks back in remembrance to Christ’s finished work and looks forward with longing to his coming return. God’s people have continued this practice to this very day.

Jesus himself explains the significance of the bread and wine.¹¹ The broken bread represents his body, which was about to be broken by blows, scourging, and crucifixion. The wine represents his blood, which is about to be poured out in order to inaugurate the new covenant and to bring forgiveness of sins to many. Just as the old covenant established by God with his people Israel at Sinai was inaugurated with the blood of sacrifices (Ex. 24:8), the new covenant, which would bring forgiveness of sins to all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles, was inaugurated by blood on a Roman cross. The language used by Jesus concerning his body being “given for you” and his blood being “poured out for many” points to the sacrificial nature of his death.¹²

COMMENTARY

The setting in John parallels that of the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but John focuses more on what Jesus taught his followers during and after the meal. Jesus, knowing that the end is near, spends his final hours instructing his twelve disciples, the representatives of his new messianic community.¹⁵ John describes these final hours of intensive teaching and modeling of service by noting that Jesus “loved them [i.e., his followers] to the end” (John 13:1). Time is short, and every word and action matters. Jesus has a clear understanding of the suffering and difficulty that lie ahead, but the disciples are still unaware of the rapid succession of events that are about to happen and are unprepared for Jesus’s departure and their future life without his physical presence. This final discourse covers a lot of ground, but several themes recur, including Jesus’s continuing mission through the Spirit and his disciples, and the centrality of love, joy, and peace in the lives of Jesus’s followers.

JESUS PREDICTS PETER’S DENIALS

Jesus foretells Peter’s denials. MATTHEW 26:31–35, MARK 14:27–31, LUKE 22:31–34

COMMENTARY

After earlier shocking his disciples with the announcement that a betrayer is in their midst, Jesus again shakes them up with the prediction that they will all fall away from him that very night.

According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus bases this prediction on the prophecy contained in Zechariah 13:7 but assures his disciples that after he is raised up he will go before them to Galilee.³¹ This prediction that they will fall away does not indicate that the eleven will cease to be Jesus's disciples but that they will fail in the face of persecution that night. Jesus promises restoration even as he predicts failure.

Peter famously contradicts Jesus's prediction by claiming that he will never fall away and will follow Jesus to prison and death.³² Peter persists in his well-meaning but ultimately arrogant claims in spite of Jesus's bluntly telling him that he will deny Jesus three times before the rooster crows.³³ The other disciples, influenced by Peter's shortsighted show of confidence, make similar claims.³⁴

Luke includes some additional details in his report of this incident. Satan has desired to defeat the disciples (the "you" in Luke 22:31 is plural), but Jesus has prayed for Peter (the "you" in Luke 22:32 is singular), that his faith will not fail and that after repenting he will strengthen the other disciples. This prayer that Peter's faith will not fail fits remarkably well with the content of Jesus's prayer for his disciples in John 17:6–19. The mention of Satan's activity that fateful night matches his involvement in Judas's betrayal.³⁵ Satan did not just want to kill Jesus through the betrayal; he intended to destroy the faith of all of Jesus's followers. Jesus is confident that his prayer will counteract and defeat Satan's intentions.

³⁰ Matthew 26:31 and Mark 14:27 place this event after leaving the upper room, while Luke and John place the prediction in the Upper Room Discourse. It is quite possible that such an alarming and startling prediction resulted in multiple discussions. This hypothesis is strengthened by the different details included in Luke and John. Matthew and Mark indicate that Peter repeatedly refused to acknowledge Jesus's prediction and the rest of the disciples said the same—a situation possibly resulting in a repetition of the conversation.

³¹ Jesus possibly made this reference to Galilee to defuse expectations of an immediate revolution in Jerusalem.

³² Matthew 26:33, 35; Mark 14:29, 31; Luke 22:33; John 13:37.

³³ The reference to the rooster crowing was an idiomatic way of describing the coming of dawn, and since roosters regularly crow multiple times, often minutes apart, Mark's reference to the rooster crowing twice points to the same general time period: Peter will deny Christ before sunrise.

³⁴ Matthew 26:35; Mark 14:31.

³⁵ Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27; see also Job 1–2 for a similar request from Satan.

THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE

Jesus and the disciples go to Gethsemane, where he struggles in prayer and they struggle to stay awake late into the night.

MATTHEW 26:36–46, MARK 14:32–42, LUKE 22:40–46

COMMENTARY

Gethsemane

Since Deuteronomy 16:1–7 indicates that the Passover evening had to be spent in Jerusalem (including the Mount of Olives), Jesus and his eleven remaining disciples do not return to Bethany as they had done throughout the week. Instead, after leaving the upper room and their Passover meal, they cross down into the Kidron Valley to the east of the city walls and ascend back up to the garden of Gethsemane, a place the disciples evidently knew well and where they had often spent time with Jesus (John 18:2). Gethsemane, derived from a word meaning "oil press," was located at the foot of the Mount of Olives, about 300 yards (or 274 meters) east/northeast of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. John's mention

of Jesus and his followers *entering* the garden may indicate that it was a walled garden (John 18:1).

It is now late in the night. Upon entering the garden, Jesus instructs his disciples to sit at a certain location while he goes farther on with his closest disciples: Peter, James, and John. The time for discussion and instruction is now over, and Jesus is filled with sorrow and distress in anticipation of the coming events. He shares his anguish with his closest human friends: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me" (Matt. 26:38). Jesus's divinity did not eclipse his humanity (see John 11:35), and he keenly felt

his need for human support and companionship during his final hours—it is no sign of weakness to want companionship and support before the evil face of death.

Jesus Prays

Going a little farther (a “stone’s throw” according to Luke 22:41), Jesus engages in fervent personal prayer, crying out to his Father and imploring him to find another way—if there could be another way—yet ultimately submitting to God’s will: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). Jesus knows he is about to bear God’s judgment for sin as a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the world. “Cup” was a common metaphor for God’s righteous wrath poured out on sinners.³⁸ Jesus is about to drink this “cup” in the place of others; he is the only one who could.

In this Jesus’s darkest hour, he models for his disciples and future believers the cost and necessity of full submission to the will of God. Submission is not always pleasant, and often painful, but it is always worth it. The author of Hebrews likely comments on these final hours of prayer when he writes, “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence” (Heb. 5:7).

³⁸ Isaiah 51:17–23; Jeremiah 25:15–18; Lamentations 4:21; Ezekiel 23:31–33.

The Disciples Sleep

Taking a break from his prayer, Jesus turns to his disciples, only to find them sleeping. The only sources of human support and help during the hardest moments of his life prove to be unreliable. Even in this, Jesus is more concerned for their welfare than his own—he knows that they, too, must pray in order to be equipped to face the temptations and difficulties ahead. “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41). Jesus is not the only one about to be tested. Although Luke mentions this happening only once, Matthew and Mark provide the additional detail that this cycle was repeated three times. Each time Jesus left, he prayed, imploring God to find another way yet submitting himself to God’s will, and each time he left, the disciples fell asleep. Mark also includes the detail that the disciples “did not know what to answer him” (Mark 14:40). They were likely ashamed and embarrassed, yet too tired to help themselves.

Luke provides two additional details. In the absence of human support, God did not leave Jesus alone but sent an angel to strengthen him (Luke 22:43; see also Matt. 4:11 where angels ministered to him in his weakness). This angelic support, however, could not remove the agony, and Luke describes Jesus’s intense mental and physical condition by noting that “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). The word “like” may indicate the use of metaphor, although Jesus could also have been experiencing hematidrosis, a rare medical condition in which the blood vessels burst under extreme anguish or physical stress and sweat mixes with blood. Jesus knew that he was about to make a costly sacrifice, and the only way out was to move forward.

When Jesus awakens the disciples the third time, he has evidently seen or heard the approaching mob and warns his disciples accordingly: the hour and betrayer are at hand—nap time is over. Jesus has prayed his heart out and is now ready to confidently face his coming death.

¹ The references in John 13:1; 18:28; and 19:14 that seem to describe the Passover meal as yet to come do not present a genuine contradiction. The celebration of Passover and the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread were joined together in popular observance (see Matt. 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:1, 7), so the statements in John 18:28 and 19:14 likely represent the desire of the Jewish leaders to avoid defilement so that they could continue participating in the ongoing festival.

² The early Christians rightly interpreted Jesus’s death as that of the ultimate Passover Lamb whose blood would shield his people from God’s wrath against sinful humanity. Paul makes this exact point when he argues that “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

³ Matthew 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19; 26:2.

⁴ Mark 14:16; Luke 22:13.

⁵ Obvious examples include how Luke mentions two cups (Luke 22:17–18, 20); how Jesus’s statement about his betrayer occurs after the meal in Luke and before the meal in Matthew and Mark; and how John does not include information about the Lord’s Supper but instead recounts Jesus’s washing of his disciples’ feet.

⁶ Matthew 26:21, 26; Mark 14:18, 22.

⁷ Matthew 26:21–25; Mark 14:18–21; Luke 22:21–23.

⁸ Matthew 26:22; Mark 14:19.

⁹ Matthew 26:24; Mark 14:21; see also Luke 22:22.

¹⁰ For further references to the final celebratory banquet at Christ's return see Isaiah 25:6–8; 65:13; Matthew 8:11; 22:1–14; 25:10; 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 13:29–30; 22:30; and Revelation 19:9.

¹¹ Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20.

¹² Leviticus 17:11 makes clear that blood was tied to atonement in the Old Testament sacrificial system. This system, in its entirety as well as in its underlying premise that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Heb. 9:22), pointed ahead to Jesus as the ultimate substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the world.

¹⁵ John emphasizes that Jesus knew the hour had come to depart from the world and return to his Father (John 13:1, 3; 16:28; 17:11). John 13:1, 3 makes clear that Jesus viewed the temporary nature of his upcoming suffering from an eternal perspective—he was departing from the world and going back to God (see also Heb. 12:2).

¹⁶ These themes occur as follows: mission (John 14:15–27; 15:26–16:15; 17:18); love (John 13:1, 34–35; 15:9–13; 17:26); joy (John 15:11; 16:22–24; 17:13); and peace (John 14:27; 16:33).



GOOD FRIDAY

Journey to the Cross

APRIL 3, AD 33

THE BETRAYAL AND ARREST OF JESUS

Jesus is betrayed by Judas and arrested by the authorities (perhaps after midnight, early Friday morning).

MATTHEW 26:47-56

MARK 14:43-52

LUKE 22:47-53

JOHN 18:2-12

COMMENTARY

The Setting

The scene is the garden of Gethsemane—a place Judas knew because Jesus often met there with his disciples.¹ The time was most likely after midnight, early Friday morning. Judas's appearance ominously signals Jesus's imminent demise. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all draw attention to the fact that Judas was "one of the twelve."² One can almost discern a mixture of disgust and incredulity in the evangelists' account: one of the Twelve, Jesus's inner circle, has treacherously turned against him and betrayed his Master.

The "Great Crowd"

Judas leads a crowd—Matthew even speaks of a "great crowd"³—with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (i.e., the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin; details

¹ John 18:2.

² Matthew 26:47; Mark 14:43; Luke 22:47.

³ Matthew 26:47.

Accusations and Silence

The Jewish leaders hurry to expedite the trial and arrive at the death sentence before the day progresses and news of Jesus's arrest can spread among the masses of Passover pilgrims. They will be in a much stronger position to spin the story and engage in damage control of popular opinion once a sentence has been reached. In their haste to proceed with the trial, they are not particularly careful in their selection of witnesses and therefore can only come up with contradictory accounts. No charges could stick apart from the agreement of at least two witnesses, and clearly the witnesses whose testimony the Jewish leaders have solicited are not committed to the truth.¹⁶ Matthew describes them from the start as "false witnesses."

The most serious charge Jesus's accusers are able to produce is his statement, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19–21). Jesus was speaking of the "temple" of his body and was presenting himself as the replacement of the physical temple, which would soon be destroyed by the Romans. Jesus will soon be the person through whom God's people have complete and unhindered access to God. His words, however, were easily misinterpreted and twisted ("I will destroy this temple," Mark 14:58) as a threat against the physical temple—as if Jesus somehow wanted to lead an armed mob to destroy the physical temple! Even with regard to this charge, however, the testimony of Jesus's accusers does not agree (Mark 14:59).

Jesus responds to these claims with utter silence, for he knows that the outcome of the proceedings against him is already determined, and there is nothing he can say that will not subsequently be twisted and used against him. The court has already made up its mind and is simply looking for the smallest grounds for the death sentence. Jesus's silence also fulfills the prophecy made concerning the suffering servant in Isaiah: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,

¹⁶ Since these witnesses could not agree on a coherent story, their testimony could not be used in a formal charge (see Deut. 17:6).

so he opened not his mouth" (Isa. 53:7). Jesus's silence places full responsibility upon his accusers for the outcome of the trial.

Jesus's Claim

The high priest was apparently getting impatient with the progress of the trial and Jesus's refusal to answer the various false witnesses. He asks Jesus directly whether he is the Christ, the Son of God.¹⁷ An affirmative answer will give Caiaphas a legitimate basis for requesting the death penalty from Pontius Pilate: insurrection and treason. This was the only question that really mattered, and Jesus's answer does not disappoint: not only does Jesus break his silence with an affirmative answer, but also he proceeds to apply both Daniel 7:13–14 and Psalm 110:1–2 to himself. He himself is the divine Son of Man who will sit at Yahweh's right hand and come on the clouds to receive his universal eternal kingdom.

This affirmation seals Jesus's death on both theological and political grounds. Theologically, Jesus has blasphemed by claiming to be the Son of God—this was completely unacceptable to the Jewish leadership. Politically, Jesus has claimed to be the one who will come as God's agent to receive cosmic kingship—this was unacceptable to the Romans who recognized only one emperor. The Sanhedrin now has what they want. Jesus

has made a clear, self-incriminating statement in front of many witnesses that expresses his unique divine relationship to Yahweh and declares his intentions to overthrow the Romans, and all earthly kingdoms, and establish God's kingdom on earth. Ironically, this is exactly what many first-century Jews hoped and longed for, but the reigning Jewish leadership has already made up their minds that Jesus is not the one. After all, how could Jesus be God's Messiah when he did not support the currently established temple leadership?

¹⁷ Matthew 26:63; Mark 14:61; Luke 22:67. Luke's account (Luke 22:63–71) summarizes and conflates all three phases of the Jewish trial around this one question and Jesus's answer, indicating that this was the central issue and charge from the point of view of Luke and his intended readers. The question of Jesus's messianic identity hung over his entire public ministry. On the one hand, his words and actions fit messianic expectations, but he never publicly claimed to be the Messiah (John 10:24; see also his private instructions to his disciples in Matt. 16:20; Mark 8:30).

Following Jesus's startling and unexpected declaration, the high priest tears his robes and puts an end to further witnesses: "What further witnesses do we need?"¹⁸ High priests were prohibited from engaging in the symbolic action of tearing one's clothes (Lev. 10:6; 21:10), but Jesus's "blasphemous" answer produces an immediate, vehement response with no regard for such technicalities: "And they all condemned him as deserving death."¹⁹ Despite Jesus's death sentence by the Sanhedrin, the Jews were not allowed to execute individuals under Roman rule.²⁰ The Romans permitted the Jews a degree of judicial freedom in regard to their own cases but reserved the final say in cases of capital punishment. Jesus will stand trial for his life before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

The Beatings Begin

Although the Jewish leaders needed to wait until sunrise on Friday to grant a formal Jewish verdict and receive approval from the Roman governor, the end result was not in doubt, and the mocking and abuse began. Surrounding guards, probably leaders of the temple police, begin to spit on Jesus and strike him. This physical abuse brought about the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies: "His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind" (Isa. 52:14); and "I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting" (Isa. 50:6).

The guards mock his claim to be God's Messiah by covering his eyes, striking him, and asking him to prophesy concerning the identity of the one who struck him.²¹ They address him as "Christ" in mockery, not faith. Luke notes that they blasphemed him by saying many other things against him.²² This mockery and physical abuse is just a foretaste of what Jesus will soon experience at the hands of Roman soldiers.

PETER DENIES JESUS

As predicted, Peter denies Jesus and the rooster crows.

MATTHEW 26:58, 69–75

JOHN 18:15–18, 25–27

COMMENTARY

Peter's denial of Jesus stands as one of the most poignant and memorable events that transpired during Jesus's final day. One of Jesus's closest friends, a man who hours earlier had sworn to stand by Jesus no matter what the sacrifice or cost, denies even knowing Jesus and abandons him in his darkest hour. Pathos drips from the Gospel accounts—the tragedy is palpable, and Peter leaves the scene a broken man.

Initial Loyalty

At first, Peter seems to be making good on his earlier pledges of loyalty. When all the other disciples except one, “[an]other disciple” (likely John), abandon Jesus and flee for their lives in fear, Peter follows and gets as close as he possibly can to the scene of the Jewish trial.²³ John describes how Peter gained access to the courtyard of the high priest. John is somehow known to the high priest and easily gains entrance for himself. When John notices that Peter is loitering outside the courtyard, he speaks to the servant girl who is watching the door and convinces her to let Peter in as well.

Peter and John are both putting their lives on the line at this point. Their leader is on trial for his life and is being explicitly questioned by Annas about his disciples (John 18:19).²⁴ So far, Peter is risking his life to stay near his leader. Apparently, John is able to get inside the house while Peter remains in the courtyard and warms himself near a charcoal fire with servants, officers, and other bystanders. He is determined to stay near Jesus until the end (Matt. 26:58).

Suspicious and Denial

Peter was obviously hoping to blend in with the crowds of people and observe the proceedings from anonymous safety. Trouble begins when the servant girl who had given Peter entrance at the door approaches and confronts Peter: “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.”²⁵ She had apparently seen Peter with Jesus at some point in the past week of Jesus's public ministry. Peter immediately denies having known Jesus “before them all” (Matt. 26:70).

A little later, another servant girl begins to say the same thing, and she along with the bystanders again ask Peter if he is one of Jesus's disciples.²⁶ This time he denies acquaintance with Jesus by an oath.²⁷ The oath emphasizes to those around that he certainly is not one of Jesus's disciples.

²³ Matthew 26:58; Mark 14:54; Luke 22:54–55; John 18:15–16. Luke places Peter's denial before phase 2 of the Jewish trial, Matthew and Mark place it after phase 2, and John divides it into two sections before and after phase 1 of the Jewish trial. These differences are not contradictions but the constraints of narrative storytelling: the time span of Peter's denials parallels the first two stages of Jesus's Jewish trial, so each narrator had to place it either before or after. The events took place simultaneously.

²⁴ Jesus refused to answer Annas's question about his disciples, likely protecting them from immediate arrest and future suspicion and harassment (John 18:20–21).

²⁵ Matthew 26:69; see also Mark 14:66–67; Luke 22:56; John 18:17.

²⁶ Matthew 26:71; Mark 14:69; Luke 22:58; John 18:25.

²⁷ Matthew 26:72. Jesus had taught that oaths should not be taken (Matt. 5:33–37). Among his followers, no oaths were needed—every word should be truthful.

A third time, about an hour later, according to Luke, the bystanders again question Peter's relationship to Jesus. John mentions that a relative of Malchus (the man whose ear Peter had cut off) led this round of questioning (John 18:26). Peter's Galilean accent gives him away and makes clear to the bystanders that he is from Galilee. Putting two and two together, they conclude that he is, after all, very likely one of Jesus's followers. At this point, Peter is pretty scared. His plan to blend in with the crowd and to observe the proceedings from anonymous safety have completely failed, and the bystanders know he has been lying about his relationship with Jesus. How can he convince them? In desperation, Peter resorts to the most drastic affirmation of truth he can think of—he calls down a curse on himself and solemnly swears that he does not know Jesus.²⁸ Such an emphatic curse likely convinced some of the bystanders—it was a very serious matter to call down God's wrath upon oneself.

What would have happened if Peter had not denied Jesus and had openly acknowledged his allegiance to the accused? He would very likely have been detained for questioning and been harassed. It was not likely that he would have lost his life—it was hard enough for the Jewish leaders to get Pilate to sentence Jesus to death, much less one of Jesus's followers. On the other hand, Peter's act of violence in the garden of Gethsemane (cutting off Malchus's ear) may have led to harsher consequences—at least at this point he had good reasons to suspect that he was in danger of imprisonment or death. What is more, unlike Jesus, Peter did not have the protection of widespread popular favor. But in stark contrast to the example of Jesus, Peter chose the path of expedience instead of faithfulness, being paralyzed by the fear of man rather than the fear of the Lord.

The Rooster Crows

Immediately following Peter's third denial the rooster crows.²⁹ Luke notes that Jesus at this time turned and looked at him—implying eye contact. Jesus may have looked out a window. Or perhaps he was being moved from one location to another within the residence and gained sight of the courtyard.³⁰ In either case, Jesus's look—likely less of a glare and more of a serious look filled with sadness and compassion—triggers Peter's memory. In all the excitement and danger of the morning, he has forgotten about Jesus's earlier prophecy, that he was going to deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed that night—a prediction that Peter had vehemently denied, even rebuked.

Upon remembering Jesus's words, Peter rapidly leaves the courtyard, finds his way into the safety of the dark, maze-like streets of Jerusalem, and weeps bitterly. Everything he thought he knew about himself, all his self-confidence and belief in his undying loyalty to his Master, has been shattered and lies in utter ruins. He sees himself as a failure, a liar, a traitor, and one who has just invoked God's wrath upon himself in denying the Messiah just to save his own skin. Perhaps he recalled Jesus's earlier words: "Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."³¹ Not only has he betrayed and denied the man he had trusted and followed for the past three years, leaving him to face his accusers and die alone, but also he has incriminated himself before God's judgment seat by uttering his curse and oath.

²⁸ Matthew 26:74; Mark 14:71.

³⁰ Between 1973–1974 six Herodian villas were excavated in Jerusalem (under the leadership of Nahman Avigad) and then restored from 1985–1987 (under the supervision of Leen Ritmeyer). One of the buildings, known as the Palatial Mansion (or Herodian Mansion), was undoubtedly used by the temple priests. It was located just opposite the southwest corner of the Temple Mount and was unusually large, with a footprint of 6,500 square feet (600 m²). Its usable living space was twice that size. Its size, location, ornamentation, and four ritual baths—combined with evidence of a large fire—have led to a possible identification as the palace of Annas the high priest, which had been burned in AD 70 (Josephus, *War* 2:426). The plan of the palace was designed around a central courtyard. There is a spot in the southwest corner of the courtyard (near the entrance/exit) that would allow someone such as Peter to look directly through the window of the large reception hall, which measured 33 feet by 21 feet (11 m by 6.5 m). The mansion was built into a slope descending to the east. Because the entrance was higher than the courtyard, Peter would have descended stairs to reach the courtyard, which fits with Mark’s comment that Peter was “below in the courtyard” (Mark 14:66). For more details, see the following interview: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2012/08/28/is-this-the-high-priestly-palace-where-jesus-stood-trial/>.

³¹ Matthew 10:33; see also Mark 8:38; Luke 12:9.

THE JEWISH TRIAL OF JESUS (PHASE 3): THE FINAL VERDICT

After sunrise on Friday, the final consultation of the full Sanhedrin condemns Jesus to death and sends him to Pilate.

MATTHEW 27:1–2

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death.

And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

MARK 15:1

And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council.

And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate.

COMMENTARY

The Gospel authors pass over the final verdict of the Jewish trial in relative brevity. The most powerful members of the council had already reached their verdict—there was no doubt after Jesus’s christological confession and the high priest’s dramatic tearing of his robes that Jesus was worthy of death. The formal verdict only requires the advent of sunrise and a quorum of the Sanhedrin. This

final judgment possesses an air of legality that the earlier verdict lacked. The appearance of legality, in turn, is essential if the Jewish leaders are to win the battle for public opinion.

The Jewish leaders waste no time in passing the verdict and in bringing their charges against Jesus before Pilate. It is important for them to get this matter taken care of as soon as possible in order to avoid any civil disturbance at the Passover and for them to be able to take part in the normal rituals of the festival. The trial is over just as quickly as it had begun, and Jesus’s fate is now in the hands of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

THE ROMAN TRIAL OF JESUS (PHASE 1): PILATE

Pontius Pilate questions Jesus and sends him to Herod Antipas.

MATTHEW 27:11–14

Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Jesus said,
“You have said so.”

But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer.

Then Pilate said to him,
“Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?”

But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

³⁷ Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27.

MARK 15:2–5

And Pilate asked him,
“Are you the King of the Jews?”

And he answered him, “You have said so.”

And the chief priests accused him of many things. And Pilate again asked him,
“Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.”

But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

LUKE 23:1–7

Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying,

“We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.”

And Pilate asked him,
“Are you the King of the Jews?”

And he answered him, “You have said so.”

Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man.”

But they were urgent, saying,

“He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place.”

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

And when he learned that he belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.

JOHN 18:28–38

Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor’s headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor’s headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. So Pilate went outside to them and said,

“What accusation do you bring against this man?” They answered him,

“If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.”

Pilate said to them,

“Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.”

The Jews said to him,

“It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.”

This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him,

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered,

“Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”

Pilate answered,

“Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?”

Jesus answered,

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”

Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?”

Jesus answered,

“You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them,

“I find no guilt in him.”

COMMENTARY

Despite the fact that the Sanhedrin had sentenced Jesus to death, it did not have the legal authority to actually execute Jesus. In order to maintain control, the Romans had reserved the right to mete out capital punishment. For this reason, as soon as the Sanhedrin had produced a formal sentence, they brought Jesus bound to Pilate. Pilate had been appointed as the governor of Judea by Emperor Tiberius (ruled AD 14–37) and served in this capacity from AD 26–36.³⁸ Normally, Pilate would have been at Caesarea, but during major festivals such as the Passover he came to Jerusalem in order to keep the peace during that politically turbulent time.

John alone provides the initial details of the first phase of the Roman trial.³⁹ The Jewish leaders do not want to enter the governor’s headquarters because it would make them unclean and unable to participate in the ongoing celebrations during the Feast of

³⁸ Jesus was crucified in either AD 30 or 33 (the latter being more likely). If the latter, Pilate’s standing with Tiberius had grown more tenuous because Pilate’s patron, a man by the name of Sejanus (commander of the praetorian guard in Rome) to whom Pilate likely owed his appointment, had been executed in the interim (on October 18, AD 31, to be exact) on account of treason. This would have rendered Pilate even more vulnerable to pressure by the Jewish leadership (see esp. John 19:12: “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend,” on which see further below). ³⁹ John 18:28–32.

Unleavened Bread of which the Passover in a more narrow sense was a part (Luke 22:1). Jews were permitted to enter a Gentile courtyard as long as there was no roof but were considered defiled if they entered a covered Gentile building. Pilate is sensitive to these Jewish concerns and goes out to speak with the Jewish delegation and ask what charges they are bringing against Jesus. The Jewish leaders are initially vague concerning the charges, but when Pilate instructs them to handle the case themselves, they indicate that they cannot do so because Jesus is guilty of the death penalty.⁴⁰ John notes that execution by the Romans would fulfill Jesus’s prophecy regarding his own death (John 12:33). First-century Jews were horrified by crucifixion and viewed it as equivalent to hanging on a tree—a death indicating that the individual was cursed by God (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13).

The Jewish leaders know that Pilate cares little for the theological charges of blasphemy that mean so much to them, so they emphasize political charges. They claim that Jesus had misled the nation, had forbidden paying tribute to the emperor, and had proclaimed himself to be the messianic king.⁴¹ The charge of blasphemy would not result in Roman execution, but for Jesus to claim kingship meant that he had set himself directly against Caesar as a rival emperor. That was a charge that could stick and, if found to be true, would certainly result in execution.

Pilate responds to these charges by asking Jesus directly: “Are you the King of the Jews?”⁴² Pilate only cares about determining whether Jesus is a threat to Roman imperial power. John alone records

the brief conversation that ensued. In short, Jesus assures Pilate that he is not a threat to Roman imperial rule in the way that the Jewish leaders have made him out to be: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Jesus makes clear that he has no intentions of leading an armed revolt against Roman rule,

⁴⁰ John 18:31.

⁴¹ Luke 23:2. According to Luke 20:20–26, the second charge was patently false. ⁴² Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33.

but his answer prompts Pilate to repeat his initial question: “So you are a king?”⁴³ Jesus responds with an expression he had used often over the past day: “You have said so.”⁴⁴ This phrase constitutes a somewhat veiled affirmative, which puts the responsibility back on the questioner.

Jesus proceeds to describe the reason he came into the world: to bear witness to the truth.⁴⁵ His kingdom is thus comprised of all who listen to his voice and are open to the truth. Pilate derisively responds: “What is truth?” (a statement laden with irony in light of the fact that the divine embodiment of truth was standing right in front of him).⁴⁶ Pilate makes a quick assessment of Jesus based upon his demeanor, appearance, attitude, and answers and concludes that he is not guilty of the charges brought against him, apparently surmising Jesus is a harmless religious teacher and hardly a threat to Roman rule.⁴⁷ As the surviving historical records make abundantly clear, Pilate was not accustomed to slavishly complying with the wishes of his subjects, including the Jewish authorities.

The chief priests, however, pounce on Jesus’s answer to the kingship question (“You have said so”) with an onslaught of intensified accusations. Pilate is greatly amazed when Jesus refuses to answer his accusers. Any other man in Jesus’s position would be eager to answer his accusers in the hope of saving his life. But Jesus feared something more than death and had higher priorities than the preservation of life. So he answered not a word in fulfillment of Isaiah 53:7: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” In amazement Pilate asks, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?”⁴⁸

Pilate is not sure what to do with Jesus. He thinks Jesus is in-

⁴³ John 18:37.

⁴⁴ Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3. See the earlier use of this expression in Matthew 26:25, 64. John indicates the same answer: “You say that I am a king” (John 18:37).

⁴⁵ John 18:37.

⁴⁶ John 18:38a. See Jesus’s earlier statement: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

⁴⁷ Luke 23:4; John 18:38.

⁴⁸ Matthew 27:13.

nocent, but the Jewish leaders are in a serious uproar. In his amazement and uncertainty, he sees an opening in one of the accusations that might provide a way out and relieve him of having to make a decision. The chief priests and the accompanying crowd of followers had insisted that Jesus was

fomenting revolt among the people from Galilee to Judea.⁴⁹ Upon inquiring further, Pilate learns that Jesus is indeed a Galilean and therefore under Herod Antipas's jurisdiction.⁵⁰ Hoping that Herod would resolve the problem, Pilate sends Jesus and the chief priests over to him.⁵¹ Let Herod deal with Jesus.

⁴⁹ Luke 23:5.

⁵⁰ Herod Antipas, tetrarch (lit., ruler of one-fourth) of Galilee (4 BC–AD 39), was one of Herod the Great's sons. He had John the Baptist beheaded when the latter denounced Herod's marriage to Herodias (Mark 6:14–29). Jesus referred to Antipas as "that fox" (Luke 13:32).

⁵¹ The Hasmonean palace in Jerusalem, where Herod was probably located, was about a ten-minute walk eastward from Pilate's headquarters.

THE ROMAN TRIAL OF JESUS (PHASE 2): HEROD ANTIPAS

Herod Antipas questions Jesus and sends him back to Pontius Pilate.

LUKE 23:8–12

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him.

So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer.

The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.

And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him.

Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate.

And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

COMMENTARY

Luke alone records the details of Jesus's impromptu trial before Herod. Unlike Pilate, Herod had heard of Jesus's miraculous activities throughout Galilee and had long desired to see him in order to personally witness some of those powerful feats. He is delighted that he finally has an opportunity to see a supernatural sign. Herod's delight does not last long—Jesus refuses even to answer any of his questions.

As with Pilate, the chief priests and scribes stand nearby, vehemently accusing Jesus, likely with the same political accusations they had earlier leveled against him. Once Herod realizes that Jesus will not perform a miraculous sign and will not even award him the respect of answering his questions, he and his soldiers begin to mock Jesus and treat him with contempt. Since Jesus is not willing to lower himself and perform for the plea-

sure of his audience, he becomes the object of sustained verbal abuse. Further abuse consists in Jesus being dressed in fancy royal clothes mocking his claim to be a king, as was customary with political pretenders.

Herod is more interested in seeing a miracle than in determining the truth regarding the Jewish leaders' accusations against Jesus or in solving Pilate's problem. When Jesus refuses to do his bidding, Herod sends him back to Pilate. Luke closes the account with the curious fact that Herod and Pilate became friends that day despite having previously been enemies. A common enemy makes strange bedfellows. Nevertheless, both conclude that Jesus is innocent of the charges that had been brought against him (Luke 23:15).

THE ROMAN TRIAL OF JESUS (PHASE 3): THE FINAL VERDICT

Jesus appears before Pilate a second time and is condemned to die.

MATTHEW 27:15–26

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them,

“Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?”

For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him,

“Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.”

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.

The governor again said to them,

“Which of the two do you want me to release for you?”

And they said, “Barabbas.”

Pilate said to them,

“Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?”

They all said,

“Let him be crucified!”

And he said,

“Why, what evil has he done?”

But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying,

“I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.” And all the people answered,

“His blood be on us and on our children!”

Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

MARK 15:6–15

Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. And he answered them, saying,

“Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”

For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.

But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead.

And Pilate again said to them,

“Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?”

And they cried out again, “Crucify him.”

And Pilate said to them,

“Why, what evil has he done?”

But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him.”

So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas,

and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

LUKE 23:13–25

Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them,

“You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people.

And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him.

Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us.

Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him.”

But they all cried out together,

“Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas”—

a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder.

Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting,

“Crucify, crucify him!”

A third time he said to them,

“Why, what evil has he done?

I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.”

But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed.

So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted.

He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.

JOHN 18:38b–19:16

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them,

“I find no guilt in him.

But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover.

So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” They cried out again,

“Not this man, but Barabbas!”

Now Barabbas was a robber.

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.

And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe.

They came up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!”

and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them,

“See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.”

So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.

Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!"

When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!"

Pilate said to them,

"Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him."

The Jews answered him,

"We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God."

When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus,

"Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him,

"You will not speak to me?"

Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?"

Jesus answered him,

"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.

Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out,

"If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."

So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha.

Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour.

He said to the Jews,

"Behold your King!" They cried out,

"Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them,

"Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered,

“We have no king but Caesar.”

So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

COMMENTARY

Pilate’s Initial Verdict: Not Guilty

When Jesus returns to Pilate from his audience with Herod, Pilate meets with the chief priests and Jewish leaders and renders his verdict: he will punish and release Jesus. Pilate makes clear that both he and Herod found Jesus innocent of the charges that had been brought against him. In their opinion, Jesus did not represent a threat to Roman rule: “Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him” (Luke 23:15), or, as John records the verdict, “I find no guilt in him” (John 18:38). This is how Pilate floats his plan to punish and then release Jesus. Yet his proposal does not satisfy the Jewish leaders.⁵²

Barabbas

Still not yielding to the inevitable, Pilate, believing Jesus to be innocent and desiring to see him freed, proposes a solution that he believes will take care of the problem. Apparently, a custom had developed according to which the Roman governor released a prisoner each Passover.⁵³ Pilate had likely perpetrated this tradition as a way of easing the political tension and anti-Roman sentiment that could have escalated at a time when a large number of pilgrims

⁵² Luke 23:16–18.

⁵³ Matthew 27:15; Mark 15:6; Luke 23:18; John 18:39.

gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate God’s past deliverance of the Jews from an oppressive foreign regime (i.e., Egypt). Pilate clearly assumes that the crowd will choose Jesus over Barabbas, a violent man who had been imprisoned for taking part in an insurrection and committing robbery and murder.

⁵⁴

Pilate does not want Jesus to be executed, because he senses that the Jewish leaders are acting out of mere envy due to Jesus’s increasing popularity. At the same time, he does not fully understand, or care about, the theological charges the Jewish authorities are leveling against Jesus.⁵⁵ In addition, Matthew records that while Pilate is waiting for an answer from the crowds, his wife sends him an urgent message imploring Pilate to have nothing to do with “that righteous man” (Jesus) because she had suffered a great deal in a dream because of him.⁵⁶ Matthew does not provide any additional details, but it is a matter of record that Romans placed a great deal of weight on dreams, visions, and omens. Whatever the specifics of the dream, Pilate’s wife connected its message to Jesus and was sufficiently disturbed by it to warn her husband.

The Call for Crucifixion

To Pilate’s chagrin, however, the Jewish leaders incite the crowd to ask for the release of Barabbas rather than Jesus.⁵⁷ At first, it may seem strange that the people, who earlier in the week had given

Jesus a hero's welcome at the Triumphal Entry, would now turn against him, but the activity of the Jewish leaders explains the shift.⁵⁸ They are actively stirring up the crowd, no doubt spreading rumors and false accusations, particularly the charge that Jesus had committed blasphemy. Even those in the crowd who were inclined to trust Jesus over against the Jewish leaders would be quite reluctant to support a man guilty of blasphemy. Once the Jewish leaders

⁵⁴ Mark 15:7; Luke 23:18–19; John 18:40. Note the possible wordplay and irony here: Bar-abbas means “son of the father,” while the people reject Jesus, who truly was the “Son of the Father,” that is, the divine Son of God.

⁵⁵ Matthew 27:18; Mark 15:10.

⁵⁶ Matthew 27:19.

⁵⁷ Matthew 27:20; Mark 15:11; Luke 23:18; John 18:40.

⁵⁸ Alternatively, the “Hosanna!” crowd welcoming him was comprised of Galilean pilgrims and the larger group of disciples, whereas the “Crucify him!” crowd was Jerusalemites.

got the ball rolling in inciting the crowd, it became an easy task to maintain the mob mentality and fury.

Despite the crowd's choice of Barabbas, Pilate attempts to carry out his earlier stated intention to punish and release Jesus. He has Jesus flogged, during which time the soldiers mock Jesus by placing a crown of thorns on his head and a purple robe on his tattered body. They pretend to offer him respect and honor as a king and then strike him with their hands.⁵⁹ Ironically, the soldiers mock the true king of the entire universe! This initial pre-sentence flogging would have been much lighter than the post-sentence scourging that Jesus will later endure.⁶⁰ After having Jesus flogged, Pilate presents him to the crowd in order to demonstrate that he did not think Jesus deserved death—he had administered the punishment that he thought Jesus deserved.⁶¹ At this point, Matthew and Mark record Pilate as asking, “Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?”⁶² This question leads to what are among the most famous and chilling words in the Gospels: “Crucify him.”⁶³

Pilate is not ready to acquiesce to the Jewish authorities' demands yet and sarcastically refuses to comply, instructing them to crucify Jesus themselves, something he knows they cannot legally do.⁶⁴ The Jewish leaders, sensing that victory is imminent, ignore Pilate's refusal and continue to insist that according to their law, Jesus must die because he had “made himself the Son of God.”⁶⁵ This statement frightens Pilate. He is not scared of the Jews but of the possible divine origin of Jesus—which would explain his wife's fearful dream. Speaking alone with Jesus, he asks, “Where are you from?”⁶⁶ When Jesus refuses to respond, Pilate issues a

⁵⁹ John 19:1–3.

⁶⁰ Some interpreters view the two accounts of flogging as identical, but it is not likely that Pilate would have ordered such a severe punishment for someone who was not yet convicted. The initial flogging recorded in John 19:1–3 and Luke 23:16 likely corresponds to the *fustigatio*, the lighter form of flogging reserved for minor crimes, while the later scourging recorded in Matthew 27:26 and Mark 15:15 in all probability points to the *verberatio*, a severe beating associated with capital punishment.

⁶¹ John 19:4–5.

⁶² Mark 15:12. Matthew 27:22 similarly records Pilate's question: “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?”

⁶³ Matthew 27:22; Mark 15:13; Luke 23:21.

⁶⁴ John 19:6.

⁶⁵ John 19:7.

⁶⁶ John 19:9.

veiled threat: “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?”⁶⁷

Jesus promptly puts Pilate in his place by answering, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”⁶⁸ It was humanly absurd for an accused man to respond in such a way. Who did Jesus think he was? Pilate, the Jewish leaders, and the crowds are in turmoil, but Jesus calmly expresses faith in God. He is not afraid, for he knows that no human authority will decide his fate.

Pilate leaves that brief encounter with a renewed desire to release Jesus, but the Jewish leaders intensify their efforts and begin to apply serious political pressure: “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.”⁶⁹ With this statement, the Jewish leaders are effectively threatening Pilate. If he lets Jesus go, news will find its way back to Rome that Pilate is not watching out for Caesar’s interests by disposing of rival kings. Such an accusation could endanger Pilate’s political ambitions if not his very survival as governor.

“Crucify him!” The crowd screams out those words again and again. Pilate tries to intervene by reasoning with the crowd, “Why, what evil has he done?”⁷⁰ But the crowd ignores Pilate and drowns him out with their repeated cries for Jesus’s crucifixion. “Shall I crucify your King?” Pilate asks, to which the Jews shockingly reply, “We have no king but Caesar.”⁷¹ In their abject blindness and desire to get rid of Jesus, the Jewish leaders deny their national heritage, according to which God alone is king (Judg. 8:23; 1 Sam. 8:7), as well as their messianic expectations.

The Final Verdict

The situation seemed to be rapidly spinning out of control. All the ingredients for a perfect storm were in place—a storm of riot,

⁶⁷ John 19:10.

⁶⁸ John 19:11.

⁶⁹ John 19:12.

⁷⁰ Matthew 27:23; Mark 15:14; Luke 23:22. Pilate’s repeated insistence upon Jesus’s innocence confirms Old Testament prophetic predictions in Psalm 38:20–21 and Isaiah 53:9.

⁷¹ John 19:15–16.

cruel Roman oppression, and bloodshed. Pilate renders his final decision on the basis of practical expediency rather than truth and justice. He firmly believes Jesus to be innocent but fears a riot and desires to satisfy the crowd.⁷² Mob justice is an oxymoron, since the whim of a mob rarely (if ever) leads to genuine justice. Pilate had good reason to fear a riot—the Jewish people were prone to civil disturbances throughout the first century, and one of his main jobs as governor was to keep the peace at whatever cost. Surely the death of one innocent man was worth avoiding the greater bloodshed sure to follow a riot.

Before communicating his final decision, Pilate engages in a symbolic action—he washes his hands in front of the entire crowd in order to indicate that he was innocent of Jesus’s blood.⁷³ The crowds respond to Pilate’s action by accepting responsibility for Jesus’s death: “His blood be on us and on our children!”⁷⁴ Despite all of Pilate’s efforts to exonerate himself and to profess his innocence regarding Jesus’s death, the fact remains that he was responsible—the whole terrible affair occurred under his jurisdiction and oversight. No matter how much Pilate tried to assert his neutrality in the matter, he could not render the Jewish leaders solely responsible for Jesus’s death.

The final stage of Jesus’s Roman trial concludes with a scourging.⁷⁵ Roman scourging was so brutal and violent that prisoners would occasionally die before the crucifixion. Even though Jesus survives this form of torture, the beating ensures he will die before sundown. During the scourging, he is tied to a post and beaten with a whip interwoven with bone and metal until his skin and tissue are shredded. The irony in each Gospel account is palpable: Jesus, a righteous man, is condemned to death while Barabbas, a guilty man, goes free. Jesus, a man declared not guilty by the Roman governor, is nonetheless given over for execution—an outrageous and transparent miscarriage of justice. John notes that this final verdict came about at the sixth hour (approaching noon) on

⁷² Matthew 27:24; Mark 15:15; Luke 23:23–24. ⁷³ Matthew 27:24.

⁷⁴ Matthew 27:25.

⁷⁵ Matthew 27:26; Mark 15:15.

the day of Preparation of the Passover, the time that lambs would be slain for the Sabbath dinner of Passover week. This connection further emphasizes that Jesus was the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.⁷⁶

Jewish Reckoning of Time

First-century Jews thought of a day as the twelve hours from dawn until dusk (John 11:9). The crucifixion accounts mention only three time designations: the third hour, the sixth hour, and the ninth hour, which suggests that the day was considered to fall roughly into four quarters. Similarly, dusk until dawn was divided into four watches of the night: the evening, midnight, when the rooster crows, and the morning (Mark 13:35).

⁷⁶ See John 1:29. This should not be seen as a contradiction of Mark, who notes that the crucifixion took place around the third hour (Mark 15:25). Both John and Mark were giving an approximate time (note John’s use of “about”). What is more, ancient people did not keep precise time.

We should remember that sundials were rarely used in the first century and that the times of sunrise and sunset change as the seasons change. Time designations were very general and based upon the sun’s position in the sky. The “third hour” of Mark 15:25 is probably not a precise reference to 9 a.m. but rather a general reference to the quarter of a day surrounding 9 a.m., that is, anytime between approximately 7:30 or 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 or 10:30 a.m.

Likewise, “sixth hour” could refer to any time from between around 10:30 or 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 or 1:30 p.m. If the sentencing was delivered, say, around 10:30 a.m., and two witnesses were to glance

at the sun in the sky, one could round down to the “third hour” while the other might round up to “about the sixth hour,” depending also on other factors they might want to emphasize.

THE ROAD TO GOLGOTHA

Jesus is mocked and marched to Golgotha.

MATTHEW 27:27–34

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him.

And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand.

And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!”

And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head.

And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross.

And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

MARK 15:16–23

And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion.

And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him.

And they began to salute him, “Hail, King of the Jews!”

And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him.

And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him.

And they led him out to crucify him.

And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

LUKE 23:26-31

And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus.

And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him.

But turning to them Jesus said,

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say,

‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’

Then they will begin to say to the mountains,

‘Fall on us,’
and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’

For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

JOHN 19:16b-17

So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.

From Pontius Pilate to Golgotha

COMMENTARY

Following Pilate’s verdict, an entire battalion of Roman soldiers— around six hundred men—gather to mock Jesus in the governor’s headquarters, the praetorium, which also served as a fortress.⁷⁷ Roman soldiers in Jerusalem were known to play cruel games with condemned prisoners, so their actions in regard to Jesus are not out of character. They dress him up as a pretend emperor with a violet-red robe, a crown of thorns, and a reed for a scepter, and pretend to honor him by kneeling and acclaiming his kingship: “Hail, King of the Jews!”⁷⁸ They proceed to further degrade him by spitting on him and striking him on his thorn-crowned head with his scepter, the reed.

It is possible that the mockery recorded by Matthew and Mark is the same as that recorded by John, since both instances reference a crown of thorns, acclamations of kingship, and the use of a royal purple robe to intensify the mockery.⁷⁹ If these depictions do describe the same event, the different

order (pre-verdict in John and post-verdict in Matthew and Mark) only indicates different narrative arrangements, since the events took place so closely in time. It is quite possible, however, that the events are distinct—the mockery of Christ’s kingship had become a running joke among his captors from the temple guards at his Jewish trial,⁸⁰ Herod and his soldiers (Luke 23:11), and the guards who administered his initial flogging (John 19:1–3). Jesus’s captors couldn’t seem to get enough laughter at his expense—oblivious to the reality of his true kingship. When they grow tired of mocking Jesus, the soldiers lead him away to be crucified.

Jesus begins the journey to Golgotha carrying his cross—pass- ing through the Gennath (Garden) Gate and outside the western second wall of Jerusalem—but at some point along the way the

⁷⁷ The reference to the entire battalion may also refer to a manipule, a subdivision of 120 to 200 soldiers.

⁷⁸ Matthew 27:29. Matthew records the robe as being scarlet while Mark and John describe the robe as purple, but, as it is today, borderline colors may be described differently by different people without representing a contradiction.

⁷⁹ Mark 15:16–20; John 19:1–3. See the earlier scene in front of Herod Antipas. ⁸⁰ Matthew 26:67–68; Mark 14:65; Luke 22:63–65.

Roman soldiers force a man named Simon from Cyrene to carry Jesus’s cross (likely weighing 30 to 40 pounds) because Jesus is too weak from loss of blood to continue carrying it.⁸¹ Cyrene, a region of North Africa, had a large Jewish population, and Simon was likely a Jewish Passover pilgrim. Mark’s mention of Simon’s sons Alexander and Rufus may be because Rufus later became an active member of one of the Roman house churches (Rom. 16:13) and was personally known to Mark and the readers of his Gospel.⁸²

Luke alone records Jesus’s final dire prophecy. Jesus hears the mourning and lamenting of some women in the crowd that throng around his execution procession. Gathering his strength, he turns to them and, using the language of Zechariah 12:10–14 and Hosea 10:8, prophesies that terrible days lie ahead for Jerusalem: “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’”⁸³ Jesus is predicting the terror and calamity that will befall Jerusalem when it will be destroyed by the Romans in AD 70—within a generation, the entire nation will be decimated! Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian who personally lived through those grim events, records how thousands of Jews were crucified by the Romans during those dark days.

When they arrive at Golgotha, the soldiers offer Jesus wine mixed with gall and myrrh, possibly as a mild sedative or another form of mockery because of its bitter taste.⁸⁴ Regardless of the reason it was offered, after tasting it Jesus refuses the drink. It is not clear how Golgotha acquired its name, which meant “Place of the Skull.” It could be because the place was a popular location for Roman executions, or because there were many tombs in the local vicinity, or because the geography itself, perhaps on a low cliff or hill, resembled a human skull. Regardless of the reason for

⁸¹ Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26; John 19:17. ⁸² Mark 15:21.

⁸³ Luke 23:28–29.

⁸⁴ Matthew 27:34; Mark 15:23; Luke 23:36.

its name, the site of Jesus's crucifixion was a location outside the city in keeping with Old Testament requirements for executions.⁸⁵

THE CRUCIFIXION

Jesus is crucified between two thieves.

MATTHEW 27:35–44

And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. Then they sat down and kept watch over him there.

And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying,

“You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself!

If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying,

“He saved others; he cannot save himself.

He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.

He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him.

For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

⁸⁵ Leviticus 24:14, 23; Numbers 15:35–36; Deuteronomy 17:5; 21:19–21; 22:24; Hebrews 13:12.

And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

MARK 15:24–32

And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take.

And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read,

“The King of the Jews.”

And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying,

“Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!”

So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying,

“He saved others; he cannot save himself.

Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.”

Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

LUKE 23:33–43

And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

And Jesus said,

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

And they cast lots to divide his garments.

And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him,

saying,

“He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!”

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying,

“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him,

“This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying,

“Are you not the Christ?

Save yourself and us!”

But the other rebuked him, saying,

“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?

And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

And he said,
“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And he said to him,
“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

JOHN 19:18–27

There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.

Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate,

“Do not write,
‘The King of the Jews,’

but rather,
‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’”

Pilate answered,
“What I have written I have written.”

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, so they said to one another,

“Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.” This was to fulfill the Scripture which says,

“They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.” [Ps. 22:18]

So the soldiers did these things, but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother,

“Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple,

“Behold, your mother!”

And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

COMMENTARY

None of the Gospel authors provides any details concerning the actual crucifixion; each simply notes the fact that the soldiers crucified Jesus.⁸⁶ Most first-century readers would have had some idea of the physical torture and public shame that crucifixion involved. Victims either died from physical trauma, loss of blood, or shock or succumbed to suffocation when they no longer had the strength to lift themselves up to breathe. The Romans employed a number of different crucifixion techniques, but the use of nails and a crossbar was common.

Jesus's enemies continue to mock him to the very end. Those passing by—and there would have been many pilgrims passing by to take part in the ongoing festival—deride and taunt him: “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”⁸⁷ The Jewish leaders do not pass up the opportunity to publicly humiliate the one who had opposed their hypocrisy: “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”⁸⁸ Jesus's suffering and impending death on the cross seem to validate the charges of the Jewish leaders; from all appearances, God was punishing Jesus for his blasphemy. The false offer of the Jewish leaders to believe if Jesus supernaturally came down from the cross likely elicited some laughter, but Jesus's enemies would not get the last laugh. There is deep irony in the fact that if Jesus had come down from the cross he would have saved himself but not others.

Luke records that Jesus responds to the crucifixion and the mockery with the powerfully haunting words, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”⁸⁹ These compelling, convicting words communicate God's indescribable love for his creation. Even in the midst of torture and mockery, Jesus extends forgiveness to his tormentors and embodies his earlier teaching

⁸⁶ Matthew 27:35a; Mark 15:24a; Luke 23:23; John 19:18. ⁸⁷ Matthew 27:39–40. See also Mark 15:29–30.

⁸⁸ Matthew 27:42–43. See also Mark 15:31–32; Luke 23:35. ⁸⁹ Luke 23:34.

on loving one's enemies (Matt. 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–36). Jesus's words also foreshadow the forgiveness through faith in him that would soon be proclaimed throughout the entire known world, fulfilling the words of Isaiah 53:12 (“Yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors”) and serving as a model for Christians to emulate as they have faced persecution and martyrdom throughout the centuries.⁹⁰

John records that several of Jesus's followers—his mother, Mary; the beloved disciple (likely John the apostle); and a few other women—stand near the cross at some point during the crucifixion.⁹¹ Despite Jesus's suffering, he makes sure to look after his mother, since his adoptive father Joseph had apparently already died and she would have had little to no personal income. Jesus entrusts Mary to the beloved disciple (perhaps because her other sons were not yet believers; John 7:5; see also Matt. 13:57; Mark 3:21, 31; 6:4) and charges him to take care of her (“Behold, your mother!”).⁹² John notes that from that time, that disciple took Mary into his own home.⁹³

The Two Robbers

Each Gospel notes that Jesus is not crucified alone but is executed along with two robbers, one on either side.⁹⁴ This fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that the suffering servant would be "numbered with the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). Both robbers initially join in the mockery and revile Jesus along with the others.⁹⁵

Luke alone records how one of the robbers experiences a change of heart, perhaps after hearing Jesus pray that God might forgive those responsible for his crucifixion. This robber rebukes the other and notes that while they are suffering the just penalty

⁹⁰ Acts 7:60; 1 Peter 2:21–24.

⁹¹ John 19:25–26. See further the discussion of the Synoptic references to the women at the cross in the next section below.

⁹² John 19:27. Mary's other sons were named James (author of the epistle of James), Joseph/Joses, Simon, and Judas/Jude (author of the epistle of Jude) (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:2–3; Acts 1:14; 1 Cor. 9:4–5; Gal. 1:19). She also had at least two daughters (Mark 6:3).

⁹³ John 19:27.

⁹⁴ Matthew 27:38; Mark 15:27; Luke 23:32–33; John 19:18.

⁹⁵ Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32.

for their crimes, Jesus is suffering as an innocent man (thus revealing faith in Jesus). The repentant robber then turns to Jesus and entreats him: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,"⁹⁶ to which Jesus responds, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."⁹⁷ Jesus's acceptance of the man powerfully illustrates the opportunity for forgiveness and eternal life that will soon be proclaimed to all people on the basis of his sacrificial death for sin. The robber has no time or ability to do any good works—he could not possibly make up for the wrong he had done if that were even possible—but he does have the strength to believe in Jesus and ask him for salvation. That is all that is needed, and the man's eternal destiny changes decisively from separation from God to spending eternity with Jesus in Paradise.

The Charge

Pilate has the charge against Jesus inscribed above his head on the cross. John notes that the inscription read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."⁹⁸ This public notice of a crucified person's crime was intended by the Romans to serve as a deterrent to any other would-be kings. Rome would accept only one emperor. With this charge, Pilate also justifies his actions in allowing an innocent man to be executed. Jesus is officially executed as a political rebel and insurrectionist who claimed to be king of the Jews. John notes that this inscription was written in Aramaic (the common language of Palestine), Latin (the official Roman language), and Greek (the international language of the empire) in order to ensure the widest possible readership among the throngs of Passover pilgrims.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Luke 23:42.

⁹⁷ Luke 23:43. The thief had only asked Jesus to remember him when he would come into his kingdom (v. 42). Jesus, in reply, tells him that he would be with him in Paradise "today." The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) refers to the garden of Eden by using the same Greek word (see also Gen. 2:8–9). Jesus's words may hint at the restoration of the intimate relationship humans enjoyed with God prior to the fall. This restoration occurs instantaneously upon conversion, although it is fully consummated only in the eternal state.

⁹⁸ John 19:19. The other Gospel authors abbreviate slightly to focus on the charge itself. Matthew notes that the inscription read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matt. 27:37). Mark sums up the content of the inscription as "The King of the Jews" (Mark 15:26), while Luke glosses it as "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38). See the chart on p. 20.

⁹⁹ John 19:20.

Friday (April 3, AD 33) 155 Jesus's Crucifixion Epitaph in Greek, Latin, and Aramaic

ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΝΑΖΩΠΑΙΟΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΤΩΝ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ IESVS NAZARENVS REX
IVDAEORVM

ישו ענצרתא מלך יהודיא

The chief priests approach Pilate and request that he change the charge to say, “This man *said*, ‘I am King of the Jews,’” but Pilate refuses their request. They had already manipulated him to execute Jesus by threatening him and stirring up a riot, and he has no desire to acquiesce to their demands on this point.¹⁰⁰ In truth, of course, as John hints in fine irony, Pilate was executing Jesus for actually being the King of the Jews. This charge, which was the basis for Jesus’s condemnation and execution by the Romans, quickly became a confession of truth for the early Christians and believers through the centuries.¹⁰¹ Jesus was not just a king; he is *the* king, and he will return one day to finally and fully establish God’s kingdom on his newly created heaven and earth.

Gambling for Jesus’s Clothes

After lifting up Jesus on the cross, the soldiers divide his remaining earthly possessions, that is, the clothes he had been wearing.¹⁰² This probably included his head covering, garments, belt, and sandals. Because Jesus’s inner tunic was one seamless piece, the soldiers decide to cast lots for it; it would hardly be worth anything if it were torn up and divided evenly. By this action, the Roman soldiers unwittingly fulfill the psalmist’s prophecy: “They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots” (Ps. 22:18). It is remarkable that at the end of Jesus’s life all of his worldly possessions consisted of the clothes on his back. His was hardly a successful life by natural standards—he left no

¹⁰⁰ John 19:21–22.

¹⁰¹ On crucifixes and representations of the crucifixion in both the Western and Eastern Church, the inscription was usually depicted by acronym: either INRI (Latin: Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdæorum) or INBI (Greek: Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων).

¹⁰² Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:24; John 19:23–24.

descendants, and he had no property or wealth. Yet despite his “failure” to make much of himself by worldly standards, Jesus’s life, ministry, message, death, and resurrection literally changed the course of world history and made it possible for human beings to be reconciled to God and experience eternal salvation.

The Last Seven Sayings of Jesus

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”	Luke 23:34
“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”	Luke 23:43

“Woman, behold, your son! . . . Behold, your mother!”	John 19:26–27
“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”	Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34
“I thirst.”	John 19:28
“It is finished.”	John 19:30
“Father, into your hands I com- mit my spirit!”	Luke 23:46

THE DEATH OF JESUS

Jesus breathes his last.

MATTHEW 27:45–56

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?”

that is,

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” [Ps. 22:1]

And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.”

And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said,

“Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.”

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said,

“Truly this was the Son of God!”

There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

MARK 15:33–41

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”

which means,

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” [Ps. 22:1]

And some of the bystanders hearing it said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.”

And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying,

“Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.”

And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,

“Truly this man was the Son of God!”

There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

LUKE 23:44–49

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed.

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said,

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.

Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying,

“Certainly this man was innocent!”

And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

JOHN 19:28–37

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture),

“I thirst.”

A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said,

“It is finished,”

and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.

He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled:

“Not one of his bones will be broken.” [Ps. 34:20] And again another Scripture says,

“They will look on him whom they have pierced.” [Zech. 12:10]

COMMENTARY

Darkness Covers the Land

Jesus hangs on the cross for approximately six hours. Mark notes that they crucified Jesus around the third hour (mid-morning) and an unusual darkness covered the land from the sixth hour (around noon) until the ninth hour (mid-afternoon), the brightest and hottest part of the day.¹⁰³ This darkness was a supernatural act of God and not a solar eclipse, because a solar eclipse requires a new moon whereas Passover took place during a full moon. In the Old Testament, darkness could represent a situation of human ignorance and sin (Isa. 60:1–3), divine lament (Amos 8:9–10), or divine judgment (Ex. 10:21–23; Amos 5:18, 20; Joel 2:10, 30–31; 3:14–16). Here, it likely communicates all of these senses: Jesus was bearing God’s judgment for the sin of the world, yet the tragic death of an innocent man should result in sorrow and lament.

Jesus Dies

At the ninth hour, Jesus utters a despairing cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹⁰⁴ Jesus drew this lament of utter God-forsakenness from Psalm 22:1, which states, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?” In some mysterious way beyond our human understanding, Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, is cut off and separated from God because he is bearing the sin of humanity and enduring God’s wrath

as a substitute for and in place of sinful humans.¹⁰⁵ Of course, Jesus knows how Psalm 22 ends—in vindication—and may be reminding us that forsakenness is not the end of the story.

Jesus's cry does not indicate that he was bewildered or confused—as if he actually expected God to rescue him from the cross and was disappointed—but rather expresses the terrifying cost of

¹⁰³ Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44–45.

¹⁰⁴ Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.

¹⁰⁵ As the apostle Paul put it memorably, “For our sake he [God the Father] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Since the Aramaic word for God (*'Eli*) sounds similar to the Hebrew name Elijah (*'Eliyah*), some of the bystanders interpret Jesus's cry as a request for help from Elijah and express curiosity: will Elijah actually come and save Jesus before he dies?¹⁰⁶ Jesus knows that the end is near and in order to fulfill Scripture says, “I thirst.” This was likely to fulfill Psalm 69:21, which states, “And for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink,” although Psalm 22:15 also speaks of the sufferer's thirst. In response to Jesus's statement, an individual rushes to bring Jesus a drink in the form of a sponge filled with sour wine, a common and cheap drink.¹⁰⁷ Jesus may have been requesting a drink in order to triumphantly utter his final words.

Despite the onlookers' speculation that Elijah might come to rescue Jesus, this is not to be the case, and after crying out with a loud voice, Jesus dies.¹⁰⁸ Luke and John both provide statements that may have been the content of the final loud voice recorded in Matthew and Mark. Luke notes that Jesus prays, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”¹⁰⁹ Jesus's faith in God remains strong even in the midst of death.¹¹⁰ John records that before dying Jesus utters the phrase, “It is finished,” indicating that the work for which he had come to earth has finally been fully accomplished—there is no longer any penalty left to be paid for sins.¹¹¹ Matthew and John describe Jesus as giving up his spirit, a description indicating that, even in his death, Jesus retains control.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 27:49; Mark 15:36.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 27:47–48; Mark 15:35–36; John 19:29.

¹⁰⁸ Matthew 27:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46.

¹⁰⁹ Luke 23:46.

¹¹⁰ This observation is all the more poignant coming so closely on the heels of the cry of dereliction. Jesus prays the bedtime prayer of a young Jewish child to the very God whose absence he has just powerfully and abruptly felt.

¹¹¹ John 19:30.

¹¹² Matthew 27:50; John 19:30.

The Gospels mention several of Jesus's followers who apparently observed the crucifixion. Apart from Mary, Jesus's mother (whom, as mentioned, Jesus entrusted to the beloved disciple), these included Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Salome the mother of the sons of Zebedee (i.e., James and John).¹¹³ These were devoted women who had followed Jesus from Galilee and had financially supported him and his disciples.¹¹⁴

Supernatural Phenomena

Several supernatural phenomena accompany Jesus's death. First, the curtain of the temple tears in two from top to bottom.¹¹⁵ This curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was 60 feet high and 30 feet wide and was only passed once a year by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. The supernatural tearing of this massive curtain indicates that God's people will now have direct access to his presence through Jesus, and Jesus's once-for-all sacrificial death has made animal sacrifices in the temple obsolete.¹¹⁶

Second, an earthquake shakes the area with enough force to split rocks.¹¹⁷ Earthquakes were not uncommon in Palestine, but the particular timing of this earthquake would have seemed quite uncanny and unnerving to unbelieving observers, while believers would have interpreted the earthquake as a divine sign of God's judgment.

Third, Matthew alone records that many deceased saints rise from the dead and appear to many in Jerusalem after Jesus's resurrection.¹¹⁸ Matthew is tantalizingly brief concerning the explicit details surrounding this event, and we are left with many unanswered questions. These Old Testament or intertestamental believers apparently receive resurrection bodies (unlike Lazarus who came back to life only to die again), bear witness to Christ's resurrection, and ascend to heaven sometime leading up to Jesus's ascension.

When the centurion and those keeping watch over Jesus see the earthquake and accompanying supernatural phenomena, Jesus's love for his tormentors, and the way Jesus died with a loud cry of prayer to God, they are filled with amazement and exclaim, "Truly this was the Son of God!"¹¹⁹ A Roman centurion, of all people, uttering this confession proves particularly poignant as the climax of Mark's Gospel, which likely was written to the church in Rome. Luke notes that the centurion also says, "Certainly this man was innocent!"¹²⁰ Luke also provides the additional detail that after Jesus's death many of the spectators leave, beating their breasts—a symbolic action indicating grief and repentance.¹²¹

¹¹³ Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:49; John 20:1–18 (see also Luke 8:2–3). See the glossary for descriptions of each of these women.

¹¹⁴ See Luke 8:1–3.

¹¹⁵ Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45.

¹¹⁶ See Hebrews 9:11–10:22. ¹¹⁷ Matthew 27:51.

¹¹⁸ Matthew 27:52–53.

Soldiers Pierce Jesus's Side

John alone records two final details of Jesus's death that fulfilled Scripture.¹²² Because the crucifixion occurred on the day of Preparation for the Sabbath of Passover week ("a high day"), the Jewish leaders ask Pilate to break the legs of the criminals so that their bodies can be taken down before the Sabbath (which began at nightfall on Friday night, perhaps around 7:00 p.m.). According to Deuteronomy 21:22–23, the bodies of hanged criminals defiled the land by remaining on a tree

overnight, and the Jewish leaders do not want any such defilement to hang over Jerusalem during Passover week. Pilate complies with their request, and the soldiers proceed to break the legs of the two robbers who have been crucified with Jesus. This ensures rapid death from asphyxiation because the crucified ones are no longer able to push themselves up to breathe.

¹¹⁹ Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39. ¹²⁰ Luke 23:47.

¹²¹ Luke 23:48.

¹²² John 19:31–37.

When the soldiers approach Jesus, they realize that he has already died and therefore do not bother breaking his legs. John does not indicate the motive, but he notes that one soldier instead takes a spear and pierces Jesus's side with it, releasing a flow of blood and water. After affirming the truthfulness of his account, John proceeds to note the two scriptural prophecies fulfilled by these final actions. First, the fact that the soldiers did not break Jesus's legs fulfilled Psalm 34:20, which claims, "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken." Second, the fact that a Roman soldier pierced Jesus's side with a spear fulfilled Zechariah 12:10, where the prophet writes, speaking of a divine suffering figure, "When they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him."

THE BURIAL OF JESUS

Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus in a new tomb.

MATTHEW 27:57–61

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

MARK 15:42–47

And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was surprised to hear that he should

have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid.

LUKE 23:50–56

Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments.

On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

JOHN 19:38–42

After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

COMMENTARY

When evening approaches, Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for permission to bury the body of Jesus. No mention is made of Joseph prior to this point in the narrative, but the four Gospels paint a brief yet vivid portrait.¹²³ Joseph was a rich man who was a member of the Sanhedrin and a secret disciple of Jesus. While being a high-standing member of the Jewish community, he had not consented to the ruling Council's decision. Joseph was a good and righteous man who was actively looking for the kingdom of God. His request to bury Jesus required a good deal of courage, since it makes his sympathy for Jesus public at a time when such sympathy could be dangerous.¹²⁴

Mark notes that Pilate is quite surprised that Jesus is already dead. It normally took much longer to die on a cross, but after confirming Jesus's death with the centurion, Pilate grants Joseph's request to bury the body.¹²⁵ It is important for Joseph to bury Jesus's body quickly, because Deuteronomy 21:23 commands that a corpse be buried on the day of death. The time constraints are intensified because Sabbath started at sundown of Friday evening.

Joseph purchases a linen shroud, wraps Jesus's body in it, and lays the body in his own newly cut tomb nearby.¹²⁶ Rock-cut tombs were very expensive and labor intensive and generally belonged to wealthy families; the tomb was likely Joseph's family tomb. He finishes the hasty burial by rolling a stone against the entrance. Archaeological evidence confirms that circular stones were occasionally used to seal tombs during this time period, although square or rectangular stones were much more common. The main purpose of the stone was to keep wild animals from devouring the body.

John notes that Nicodemus assists Joseph in the burial by providing approximately 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to wrap the body in the linen, an extravagant gesture indicating the high esteem in

¹²³ Matthew 27:57; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50–51; John 19:38.

¹²⁴ Compare the reaction of the disciples who met behind locked doors out of fear of the Jewish authorities (John 21:19, 26).

¹²⁵ Mark 15:44–45.

¹²⁶ Matthew 27:59–60; Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53; John 19:40–41.

which Nicodemus held Jesus.¹²⁷ The burial of Jesus in the tomb of a rich man confirms Isaiah’s prophecy, “And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death” (Isa. 53:9a).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke conclude their accounts of Jesus’s burial by noting that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus observe Jesus’s burial and know the tomb in which he is laid.¹²⁸

Believing that the body has been insufficiently prepared because of the hasty burial, these women pay careful attention to the location, intending to return after the Sabbath with additional spices and ointments.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ John 19:39–40. Ordinary people were normally buried in the ground, not in a tomb. The bodies were wrapped in linen shrouds with the preservatives, and when the body had decayed, the bones would be placed in an ossuary.

¹²⁸ Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55.

¹²⁹ Luke 23:55–56.

SUNDAY IS COMING...