

Matthew 27:1-26

Review

Last time, we looked at the trials of Jesus before the high priests and elders of Israel. We saw that although no true witnesses were found against Jesus (including Judas Iscariot who was not even present at the trial), the priests and elders had nevertheless predetermined that Jesus should be killed. Finally, just as morning was dawning, we saw Peter's triple denial of Jesus just as Jesus Himself had foretold during the last supper.

We take up the story in Matthew 27 just after the rooster crowed that morning.

¹When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. ²And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor. Matthew 27:1-2 (ESV)

Why did the high priests and elders not simply take Jesus outside the council chamber and stone Jesus to death themselves rather than delivering Him to Pilate?

Perhaps you've been taught as I was that the Jews didn't have the authority under the Roman occupation to carry out executions. But that's not exactly true. The gospels report other occasions when the Jews sought to put Jesus to death in accordance with the Old Testament Law – e.g. when the people of Nazareth tried to throw Jesus over the cliff outside town for “blasphemy” after Jesus told them that He is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 61:1-2 (Luke 4:16-30), and when Jesus bluntly stated in the temple “***...before Abraham was, I am.***” (John 8:48-59).

Clearly, the Jews themselves had the power to put people to death for religious “crimes.” In fact, as we'll see later Pilate himself tried to put Jesus' trial and punishment back into the hands of the Jewish leadership. But the high priests and elders didn't just want to have Jesus killed. They wanted to make Him an example to the rank and file of Israel of what would happen to people who spoke out against their religious regime. Thus, they sought to have Jesus crucified by the Romans who alone had the authority to carry out crucifixion.

Furthermore, recall that Jesus' trial and execution happened during the time of the Jewish Passover festival when all Jewish adult males were required under the Law to come to Jerusalem. The high priests and elders knew that the population of the city would be temporarily swelled during the festival, making their plot to make Jesus an example even more effective. But they also knew that many of the people coming to town for the festival believed that Jesus was a great prophet and teacher. Some even believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah – the Christ. The high priests and elders didn't want to be seen as the ones responsible for putting Jesus to death. They wanted to be able to blame the Romans for His crucifixion. They might even have hoped that Jesus' crucifixion would inspire the people to rebel against the Roman occupation and restore the Jewish priesthood to ruling authority, perhaps replacing the Roman puppet tetrarchs with a Jewish king chosen from among their own ranks.

³Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, ⁴saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” They said, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” ⁵And throwing

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down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. ⁶But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, “It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money.” ⁷So they took counsel and bought with them the potter’s field as a burial place for strangers. ⁸Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, ¹⁰and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord directed me.” Matthew 27:3-10 (ESV)

We have speculated previously about Judas’ motivations for betraying Jesus. Perhaps he did truly believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but didn’t understand Jesus’ mission on earth and thought instead that Jesus would bring about a rebellion against the Roman occupation. Maybe Judas hoped to “force Jesus’ hand” by betraying Him to the high priests and elders.

But regardless of that, we see here that Judas repented of his betrayal when he saw that they had condemned Jesus to death and that Jesus hadn’t used His own power (which Judas himself had seen) to defeat them.

Matthew 27:10 presents an interesting conundrum.

Indeed, one of the best known parts of Jeremiah’s prophecy is found in Jeremiah 18-19 – in which Jeremiah visits the house of the potter and the Lord directs him to buy a vessel from the potter and break it before the elders of Israel at the Valley of Hinnom near the Potsherd Gate of the city, proclaiming that the vessel represented Jerusalem and Judah and its impending utter destruction. Indeed, Jeremiah’s prophecy goes on to say that the Valley of Hinnom would thereafter be called the Valley of Slaughter. But Jeremiah’s prophecy makes no mention of thirty pieces of silver or of buying the potter’s field.

A similar prophecy is found in Zechariah 11. That prophecy compares Israel and Judah to a doomed flock guided by worthless shepherds. In it, God directs Zechariah to cast his own shepherd’s wages of thirty pieces of silver into the temple.

¹²Then I said to them, “If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them.” And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. ¹³Then the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD, to the potter. Zechariah 11:12-13 (ESV)

Did Matthew get these two prophecies mixed up in his account? Was Matthew aware of some additional writing of Jeremiah’s that is no longer available to us?

This passage in Matthew 27 also presents another conundrum. As we read here, Judas hanged himself and the priests used the blood money he threw into the temple to buy the potter’s field. But Luke reports a quite different version of these events.

¹⁵In those days [immediately following Jesus’ ascension] Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, ¹⁶“Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide

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to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” ¹⁸(Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) Acts 1:15-19 (ESV)

All of this begs some interesting questions for which I have no ready answer. I'd like to hear your opinions about them.

- 1) Did Matthew get this wrong? Did Peter? Did Luke? Did anyone? What might have caused these seeming conflicts in the accounts of the Gospel?
- 2) Why did God allow these disparities into His Word? Do they imply that God's Word contains errors?
- 3) Why did God give us four gospel accounts instead of one unified account?

As the college textbook writers often say when they don't know an answer, "The solution to this problem is left as an exercise for the student."

¹¹Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." ¹²But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. ¹³Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" ¹⁴But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. Matthew 27:11-14 (ESV)

The Jewish leaders and later Pilate probably took Jesus' unwillingness to respond to the accusations presented against Him as an unvoiced admission of guilt. But in fact, Jesus' silence before His accusers was fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53 concerning God's suffering servant.

*⁷He 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. Isaiah 53:7 (ESV)*

Although we won't consider this prophecy in full, we see many aspects of the prophecy fulfilled in Jesus' Gospel. In particular, Isaiah 53:4-5 is worthy of special mention.

*⁴Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:4-5 (ESV)*

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When we study the gospel books, it's always a good idea to compare all the accounts of the events in Jesus' ministry. Here in Matthew and in the parallel account in Mark 15:2-5, the discussions of Jesus' first trial before Pilate are somewhat terse. In fact, if we were to consider only these accounts, we might assume that Jesus stood before Pilate only once. Luke and John give us more detail and insight.

¹Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. ²And 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." ³And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man." ⁵But they were urgent, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place." ⁶When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. Luke 23:1-7 (ESV)

The Herod referred to here was Herod Antipas – one of four sons of Herod the Great. When Herod the Great died in 4BC, his kingdom was divided by the Romans into four parts. Hence, these puppet rulers were called tetrarchs. It was Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist imprisoned and beheaded.

⁸When 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. ⁹So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. ¹⁰The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. ¹²And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other. ¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, ¹⁴and 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. ¹⁵Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. ¹⁶I will therefore punish and release him." Luke 23:8-16 (ESV)

As we see from Luke's account, Jesus stood accused before Pilate twice. For his own reasons, Pilate tried to put the responsibility for Jesus' condemnation back onto the Jewish leadership.

ASIDE – Biblical skeptics until the mid-20th century liked to point out that there were no known contemporary extra-biblical records of anyone named Pontius Pilate being the Roman governor of Judea. Then in 1961, a stone was discovered in Caesarea Maritima inscribed with Pilate's name and the title – "Prefect of Judea." The stone commemorates Pilate's dedication of a new temple building in the city during the reign of Tiberias Caesar (AD 26-36). Thus, the stone confirms that Pilate was indeed governor of Judea at the time Jesus was crucified. The stone had been later reused as part of a new staircase in the city's theatre building during the 4th century.

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John's gospel gives us even more meaningful insight into Jesus' trial by Pilate.

28Then 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. ***29***So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ***30***They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you." ***31***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." ***32***This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die. John 18:28-32 (ESV)

If we read a little between the lines of this passage, we can discern that Pilate was annoyed to have what he considered a trivial matter of Jewish law brought before him – the Roman governor. In the Jews' reaction, we see confirmation that they had pre-determined to put Jesus to death. As we learned earlier, they weren't being completely precise when they said it was unlawful for them to put anyone to death, but only the Romans could carry out the spectacular execution by crucifixion they had determined in their council for Jesus to suffer.

John 18:28 refers to Jesus' statement in the temple earlier that week.

27"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ***28***Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ***29***The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ***30***Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ***31***Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ***32***And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ***33***He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. John 12:27-33 (ESV)

The most important truth we can take from John's account of Jesus' trial by Pilate is found at the very end.

33So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ***34***Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" ***35***Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" ***36***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." ***37***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." John 18:33-37 (ESV)

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¹⁵Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. ¹⁶And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. ¹⁷So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” ¹⁸For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. ¹⁹Besides, 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.” ²⁰Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. ²¹The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” ²²Pilate 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!” Matthew 27:15-23 (ESV)

We can see from these verses that Pilate really didn't want to condemn Jesus – not only because of the advice he received from his wife, but most importantly because he truly didn't believe that Jesus was guilty of anything deserving death. Nevertheless, as we shall soon see, Pilate bowed to the will of the crowd and their leaders despite his correct suspicions about the leaders' motivations.

The other gospel accounts give us a little more insight into Barabbas' crimes. Not only was he a thief, he was also a murderer and had led an insurrection in the city. Pilate was no doubt aware of Barabbas' record and he may himself have sat in judgment on Barabbas. Nevertheless Pilate bowed to the will of the crowd, and gained the reputation he still carries to the present day of a cowardly and indecisive governor.

²⁴So 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.” ²⁵And all the people answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” ²⁶Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified. Matthew 27:24-26 (ESV)

Of course, this story of Pilate symbolically washing the responsibility for Jesus' innocent blood from his hands is where we get our saying “I'm going to wash my hands of...” The crowd's response was quite prophetic – condemning not only themselves but even their children.

The scourging that Matthew speaks of in verse 26 refers to a severe (often fatal) whipping with the notorious cat o' nine tails – a multi-corded flail with sharp pieces of rock, glass, and metal woven into the ends of the cords designed to rip the skin and muscle from the body of the prisoner. Next time, we'll get into some of the gruesome details of Jesus' final day in the flesh of a man and the crucifixion itself. As this pitiful story unfolds, it is tempting for us to condemn the Jews, the Romans, or even ourselves for the sin which drove Jesus to the cross. But as we look into those details it is important for us to always remember two critical statements from Jesus Himself.

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¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. John 3:17 (ESV)

¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.” John 10:14-18 (ESV)

Looking Ahead

God willing, next time we'll continue with our study of Matthew with the story of Jesus's final torture, humiliation, and crucifixion.