

GOD WITH US

Part 8: JESUS

Message 23 – LAMB: The Death of Jesus

Introduction

If the gospels are “passion narratives with long introductions,” then their accounts of the death of Jesus are the centerpieces of their works. Each gospel writer tells the story in his own way, not so much interpreting the events for us; rather, simply narrating them while inserting unique details here and there, according to their own unique interests. If there is one central theme that ties all four gospel accounts of the death of Jesus together, it is the idea that Jesus came into the world to be the perfect Lamb of God, to die as the substitute sacrifice for the sins of the world. His death took place at the height of the Jewish Passover Festival, during which thousands of lambs were slain to commemorate the deliverance God provided for Israel from Egypt. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus provided a new Passover – He opened the way for us to come into the presence of the Holy Father, cleansed from the defilements of sin. Truly, everything else that Jesus said and did fades into the background as He accomplished the *primary work* that the Father sent Him into the world to do: to give His life as a ransom for humanity. In the commentary below, we will follow the general outline of events, providing Scripture *references* rather than the passages themselves.

Jesus Prays in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Matt.26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46; John 18:1

Following the Last Supper, Matthew, Mark and Luke all detail Jesus’ time of agonizing prayer in Gethsemane. (John only has one verse recording the arrival in the Gethsemane, then he moves right to the arrest of Jesus.) Jesus prayed to His Father: **“If possible, let this cup pass from Me.”** He was referring to the “cup of God’s wrath” against sin, a figure of speech from the Old Testament. Jesus was preparing to drink the cup of God’s holy judgment being poured out on the sins of the world. After agonizing three times in prayer, He yielded to the Father’s will: **“My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, Thy will be done” (Matt.26:48).**

Jesus is Arrested:

Matt.26:47-56; Mark 14:43-52; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:2-12

Judas Iscariot came with a crowd sent by the Jewish leaders. They were armed with swords and clubs. Judas identified Jesus by giving Him a kiss! When the crowd sought to arrest Jesus, Peter stepped forward, drew a sword (one of 2 swords the disciples found in the upper room earlier that night, Luke 22:35-38) and cut off the ear of Malchus, the servant of the High Priest. Jesus rebuked Peter, healed the servant's ear, and submitted to the arresting party. (How fitting that for the rest of his life the High Priest, who condemned Jesus to death as a false Messiah, would have to be reminded daily of the *miracle-working power* of Jesus as he looked at Malchus with his healed ear!) John records that in this moment, Jesus referred again to the cup of God's judgment against sin: ***“Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given Me?” (Jn.18:11).*** As Jesus was arrested, all the disciples fled in fear, except for Peter and John, who followed the arresting party first to the house of Annas and then to Caiaphas the High Priest.

Trial before the Sanhedrin:

Matt.26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65; Luke 22:54-71; John 18:13-24

They first took Jesus to the house of Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the current Jewish High Priest (Jn. 18:13-23). After Annas interrogated Jesus, he sent him to the house of Caiaphas where the Jewish Sanhedrin (council of 70) had gathered (Jn.18:24). Nighttime trials were illegal according to Jewish law; nevertheless, they put Jesus on trial all through the night, using false witnesses to try to find reason to condemn Him to death. Finally, Caiaphas sought to get Jesus to condemn Himself by speaking self-incriminating words. Combining the accounts, we have this exchange:

“I charge You by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “I am . . . and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” And they all said, “Then You are the Son of God?” And He said to them, “You say that I am.” The high priest tore his robes and said, ‘He has uttered blasphemy. What further need do we have of witnesses? We have heard it ourselves from His own lips. What is your judgment?’”

***The members of the Sanhedrin answered, “He deserves death!”
And they began to spit in His face.***

Jesus’ reference to “*the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven*” is a clear messianic reference from Daniel’s well-known heavenly vision of the divine “Son of Man” (Daniel 7:13,14). After such a clear declaration from Jesus’ own lips, there was no need for further witnesses to charge Jesus with blasphemy.

Peter disowns Jesus 3 times:

Matt.26:69-75; Mk. 14:66-72; Lk. 22:56-62; Jn. 18:15-18;25-27

During the night (at both the houses of Annas and Caiaphas), Peter was questioned by two servant girls and others who suspected him of being a companion of Jesus. Peter denied that he even knew Jesus, at one point even invoking a curse upon himself if he was not telling them the truth! No-one is a match for the power of darkness. Luke provides the most poignant detail at the moment of Peter’s 3rd denial:

The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly (Luke 22:61,62).

Certainly, Jesus’ look was not one of scorn; rather, of sadness as to Peter’s lack of awareness of the Satanic attack that had fallen on him. Yet, even in this moment, Jesus knew that He had already prayed for Peter, limiting the extent of Satan’s attack and assuring the return of Peter as a leader among leaders (see Luke 22:31,32).

Judas Hangs Himself: Matt.27:1-10

Matthew alone records Judas’ remorse and suicide, for having betrayed Jesus to the Jewish leaders. When he threw the blood money into the temple (30 pieces of silver), the priests took it and bought a field from a local potter, so that they could use it as a graveyard for strangers. Matthew sees yet another fulfillment of O.T. prophecy. He attributes this prophecy to Jeremiah even though it is found in Zechariah 11:12-13. This may be because the Jewish O.T. was divided into three major sections: Law, Writings and Prophets. The “Prophets” section began with Jeremiah, and it was common for people to refer to the entire prophetic section of the O.T. as “Jeremiah.”

Trials before Pilate and Herod:

Matt.27:11-31; Mark 15:1-20; Luke 23:1-25; John 18:28-19:3.

At morning light, the Sanhedrin took Jesus to Pilate so that they could legally enforce the death sentence against Him (John 18:31). A *blasphemy* charge would mean nothing to Pilate; so, they accused Jesus of stirring up *revolt* against Rome (Luke 23:2), which would get the governor's attention since his job depended on keeping the peace in Israel. Pilate questioned Jesus at length in private (John 18:33-38); but after Jesus told him that ***“His kingdom was not of this realm, thus His servants were not waging war,”*** Pilate concluded that Jesus was *not guilty* of insurrection (John 18:38; Luke 23:4). He attempted to release Jesus; but the Jewish leaders continued to insist on the death sentence. Pilate sent Jesus over to Herod, who happened to be in town (Luke 23:6-12), hoping that he would settle the matter. Jesus, however, would not say a word to Herod (this was the same Herod who killed John the Baptist), thus he sent Jesus back to Pilate dressed in a mock purple (i.e., royal) robe. Pilate again sought unsuccessfully to release Jesus, especially after his wife sent him a message during the trial: ***“Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I suffered much over Him today in a dream”*** (Matt.27:19).

Finally, Pilate sought to settle the matter by invoking a custom by which he would release to the Jews **one prisoner** at the Passover Feast. Barabbas, a Jewish rebel-fighter, was in prison on charges of murder and insurrection. When Pilate asked the crowd if they wanted Jesus or Barabbas to be released, they shouted for Barabbas. ***“Then what shall I do with Jesus Who is called the Christ?”*** They shouted back: ***“Crucify Him!”*** Pilate had Jesus scourged, after which they put the purple robe back on Him, adding a crown of thorns. The Roman cohort gathered to mock Jesus inside Pilate's palace, spitting upon Him, beating Him with their hands, striking Him repeatedly on His head with reeds, and kneeling before Him mocking, ***“Hail, King of the Jews!”*** When they were finished, they stripped Jesus of the purple robe and put His own clothes back on Him. Pilate then released Barabbas and delivered Jesus over to be crucified. Only Matthew records how Pilate took a basin of water and publicly “washed his hands” of the condemnation of Jesus (Matt.27:24,25).

The Crucifixion of Jesus:

Matt.27:32-44; Mark 15:20-26; Luke 23:26-34; John 19:17-27.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all note how Simon from Cyrene was forced by the Roman soldiers to help Jesus carry His cross to the place of execution. Mark alone notes that Simon was ***“the father of Alexander and Rufus”*** which implies that in later years the family of Simon had become well-known in Christian community in Rome (to which the gospel of Mark was addressed). Luke alone notes that many women were following along with Jesus, weeping as they went (Luke 23:26-32). Jesus warned them that they should be weeping over the future judgment of God that would someday fall upon Israel – likely a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD.

John alone notes how the Jewish leaders were unhappy about the inscription above Jesus’ head, ***“King of the Jews,”*** and tried to get Pilate to have it re-written to: ***“He claims to be the King of the Jews.”*** Pilate denied their request (John 19:19-22).

The gospel writers each focus on different aspects of Jesus’ 6 hours on the cross (9a.m. – 3p.m.). Matthew and Mark record how 3 groups of people mocked Jesus: those who passed by on the road, the religious leaders, and the criminals crucified next to Jesus. For Matthew, these 3 taunts serve as a reminder of the 3 wilderness temptations hurled at Jesus by the devil at the beginning of His ministry (Matt.4:1-11). To the very end, Satan was mocking, taunting and tempting Jesus.

Luke, in keeping with his emphasis on Jesus’ love for the lost, focuses on how Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who were crucifying Him: ***“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).*** Luke also records one of the criminals crucified next to Jesus repented, and Jesus promised: ***“Today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).*** Even as Jesus was dying, He was offering to lost sinners the grace of God that leads to eternal life.

John alone records how Jesus, from the cross, cared for His mother, Mary, committing her into the care of John (John 19:26,27). ***“Woman, behold your son.”*** And to John: ***“Behold your mother.”***

The Death of Jesus:

Matt.27:45-56; Mark 15:33-41; Luke 23:44-49; John 19:28-37.

From noon until 3p.m. a thick darkness came over the land of Israel. It was during these 3 hours that Jesus bore the full weight of the Father's wrath against the sin of the world. Near the end of these 3 agonizing hours, Jesus quoted the cry of desperation from Psalm 22:1 – ***“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”*** He was bearing the awful penalty against sin – separation from His Father. He then said, ***“I thirst.”*** A sponge full of vinegar was lifted on a reed to His dry lips. He then said, ***“It is finished,”*** meaning that His work of paying the price of sin was completed. Finally, He cried out in a loud voice, ***“Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.”*** Jesus then took His last breath and died.

At Jesus' death, the ground shook with an earthquake (Matt.27:51-54). The thick curtain in the Jewish Temple, separating the outer court from the Holy Place, was torn from top to bottom (indicating symbolically that the way into God's presence had been opened). These cosmic signs caused even the Roman centurion and those with him to say, ***“Surely this man was the Son of God!”*** (Matthew 27:54). The crowds that had gathered to witness Jesus' crucifixion were also stunned. When they saw these sights ***“they returned home beating their breasts”*** (Luke 23:48).

Insuring that Jesus was Dead: John 19:31-37

Only John records that to insure the 3 crucified men would die before a special Jewish Sabbath day began (Friday at 6:00), the Jewish leaders asked Pilate to break their legs (hence quickening death due to suffocation, as the crucified men could no longer lift themselves up to catch a breath of air). They broke the bones of the two other crucified men, but they found that Jesus was already dead. One of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, and out flowed blood mixed with water. The gospel writer, John, saw all of this happen firsthand:

The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken,” and, as another scripture says, “They will look on the one they have pierced” (John 19:35-37).

The Burial of Jesus:

Matt.27:57-66; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:38-42.

Jesus burial was carried out by two members of the Jewish Sanhedrin (secret followers of Jesus): Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus asked for and were granted permission from Pilate to bury Jesus. He was buried in Joseph's own personal garden tomb. All the gospels make the point that many *women* were there to witness the burial of Jesus (which happened hastily, due to the quick onset of Sabbath law at 6p.m. on Friday). The tomb was sealed by a large stone rolled down a groove at the entrance. While Joseph and Nicodemus had wrapped Jesus' body in linen with some 75 lbs. of spices (John 19:39), the women saw that there was still more that could be done to properly prepare the body for permanent burial; thus, they went home and prepared more perfume and spices, intending to finish the burial on Sunday morning (Luke 23:55,56).

Only Matthew records that the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate asking that a Roman guard be stationed at the tomb, to prevent Jesus' disciples from trying to steal the body in the attempt to "fulfill" Jesus' predictions that He would rise from the dead.