

Contemplating the Cross: Gethsemane, Arrest & Trial of Jesus

The act of betrayal by Judas takes place in the garden of Gethsemane. There are two great gardens in the Bible, the gardens of Gethsemane and Eden. They form bookends in the drama of redemption because the first garden, Eden, saw the first Adam fail the test of obedience, making redemption necessary. The second Adam in the second garden passed the test of obedience, making redemption sure. The one created the need; the other led to the deed.

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus said “yes” to perhaps the most difficult test imaginable. We see Him overwhelmed with sorrow and although He often spoke of His impending death, He now says, in Matthew 26:39, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.” Why this sudden vacillation and agony when the time finally comes for Jesus to do what He always said He would do? Where did Jesus’ divine knowledge go? Why is He in such agony? Is He afraid of the pain of crucifixion? Is He afraid of death itself? How is it that the Christians martyrs seem to go more boldly to their deaths, with singing and testifying?

As a real man, it is undeniable that Jesus would have had a genuine revulsion for the physical agony of crucifixion. It was a terrible way to die, and even if you knew it was coming and was necessary, the ordeal was much more painful than the worst surgery that you can imagine. So it still makes you apprehensive when the hour comes. While that is true, there is much more here.

Jesus knew His death would be unique. His words, “Take this cup from me,” come from the Old Testament in places like Jeremiah 25 and Isaiah 51. The language of the cup is used to suggest the pouring out of God’s wrath or draining the cup of God’s wrath to the dregs, which makes men reel and stagger. They do not stagger because of drunkenness but because of misery and bitterness. It is the cup of God’s wrath towards sin. Therefore, what Jesus most dreads is bearing sin and the consequences of sin. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 it is written, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.” I do not know how we can ever fathom how Jesus became sin. All the hatred, lies, deceit, lusts, thievery, malice, boasting, gossip—the list is endless—it was all laid upon Him, and He knew it and bore it. And He bore the wrath for it. He both became sin and bore the wrath for sin. Furthermore, He did it at the price of separation from the Father. This was what made Jesus tremble and fear, although certainly as a human being He would have feared the pain of crucifixion.

How do we account for the fact that during the Lord’s Supper Jesus said His body would be broken, while we read the prophecy that not one of His bones will be broken? We can go in a literalistic direction and say that during crucifixion none of His bones were broken, but His body was broken. I will not go into the gruesome details. During the hanging various bones would come out of joints, such as the shoulder from the socket. Crucifixion in antiquity was so gruesome that it was considered impolite to write about it, therefore we do not know everything about it. The process was considered unutterable. Apparently there were multiple ways to be crucified, but most of them describe death from a slow filling of the lungs with water as the person’s tissue broke down. So the body was indeed broken, in a global way.

How did Jesus’ arrest and trial actually happen? First, we know that the Jewish leaders believed that Jesus deserved to die. We also know that the crowds could turn on Jesus because they never truly understood what He was all about and because they never committed to Him. Third, the disciples could fall away because they never really adopted Jesus’ viewpoint with regard to His death and resurrection. Fourth, the fact that this is predicted over and over suggests that God is in control. Thus, we can explain

the events from a human viewpoint, as well as from the divine decree and plan. In order to understand, we need to try to enter into the story of Christ's crucifixion, rather stand off to the side judging and condemning Pilate and the Jewish leaders.

Have you ever been in a conversation that you could not quite penetrate? Perhaps someone kept talking about things that you did not know anything about. I remember having a meal with friends and having nothing to say for entire hour. For the first 30 minutes my friends were talking about cooking with herbs; for the second 30 minutes they were talking about the effects of diverse distillation methods on the smoothness of whiskey—I knew absolutely nothing about either of those topics. I was just waiting, wondering, “How can I get into this?” It is possible to seem like an outsider when you look at the Gospel accounts and say, “Look, how stupid, vain, venial, and foolish the Jewish authorities and Pilate are!” But that is just standing outside and condemning and never entering. We need to enter into the story as well as evaluate.

We begin with Jesus' arrest. It was actually set in motion by events described in John 11:47-57. Just after Jesus' raising of Lazarus, in verses 45 and 46, we read that many Jews saw what Jesus did and put their faith in Him. Others went to the Pharisees and told them what He had done, and the chief priests called a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jews. They expressed their concern that Jesus was performing signs. If He continued that way, everybody would believe in Him. If that happened, the Romans might come and take away their place and their nation. Their concern is partly envy, and partly self-preservation. When they mention their “place” it does not mean their place of authority; it means the temple. Some of the Jews did not like to say “the temple,” so they called it “the place.” This statement indicates that along with their concerns about faith and envy, they foresee disaster. They think it is very possible that the mobs may follow Jesus and everyone will suffer. Perhaps there were a few altruistic thoughts along with their selfish ones.

The high priest, Caiaphas, then speaks up. The literal Greek translation of his words is, “You do not know nothing.” This indicates that Caiaphas was a rough, rude man. He continues, “You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” As John points out, Caiaphas is telling the truth, but he does not know it. This is the epitome of irony—when somebody says one thing and it means something else but they do not know it. We get the picture that the truth was right there, if they could only understand their own words. Caiaphas prophesies that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation. This disproves any accusations that the Gospels are anti-Semitic. Jesus would die for the Jewish nation and also for the scattered children of God.

From that day on, the Jewish leaders resolve to kill Jesus. It is a settled matter. Judas' betrayal supplies the mechanism. He helps seize Jesus quietly in Gethsemane. According to John 18:2, he led a contingent of temple and Roman guards to the spot in Gethsemane. Jesus, as we read elsewhere, rouses His sleepy disciples just in time for them to see Judas come and kiss Jesus. The kiss identifies Jesus, and He is taken. Peter briefly resists, whips out a sword, chops off somebody's ear, and Jesus tells him that if sword play was going to resolve things, then Jesus would bring down a legion of angels. Then He puts the ear back on the man. In John, we get a perspective on Jesus' arrest that we need to observe carefully.

Jesus shows Himself to be the master of His situation. Notice that when the soldiers arrive, Jesus comes out to greet them. He asks them who they want. “Jesus of Nazareth,” they say. “I am He,” Jesus replies. In Greek the reply is not “I am He,” but simply “I am.” Actually, the way you say “I am He” in Greek is *ego eimi*, which is the same way you say, “I am God.” To the original reader, there would have been some ambiguity because Jesus is given several “I am” sayings: the door, the truth, the way and the life,

etc. He has also said in John 8, “Before Abraham was, I am.” And now we have another “I am.” If somebody knocked on your door in Israel, and you asked, “Is that you, John?” He would answer, “*ego eimi*.” It is an ordinary saying, but it can also be very loaded. It is the divine “I am.” Which one is it here? Look what happens next, and decide for yourself.

When Jesus said “*ego eimi*” in John 8:6, they drew back and fell to the ground. So which meaning does it sound like? Certainly it sounds like the divine use. And then it is made clearer that Jesus is in charge. He tells them to get up and then asks them again, “Who do you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they say again. Jesus says, “I told you I am He. If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” And they let His disciples leave. They could have all been arrested as well, but Jesus is in charge. John 18 makes it very clear that this is fulfilling His word—“No one takes my life from me. I take it of my own accord.”

Jesus is arrested, sentenced, and executed by the Romans. But the initiative lies with the Jewish leaders. Spiritually speaking, we can evaluate this event in several ways. In his book, *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott points out how John makes use of the words, “hand over,” “deliver over,” and “betray”—those are all one word in Greek, *paradidomi*. That word is used over and over. Jesus was handed over by Judas. Judas handed Him over to the priests, out of greed. The priests handed Him over to Pilate, out of envy. Pilate handed Him over to the soldiers, out of cowardice. It has also been noticed that the same word, *paradidomi* is used in Romans 8 to say that God delivered up His Son for us all. Therefore Octavius Winslow used the expression, “Not Judas for money, not Pilate from fear, not Jews in envy, but the Father from love.” Again, all human perspectives are valid, but they are limited. What moves things is God’s plan, and simultaneous with human hatred is God’s love.

Consider next the trial of Jesus by the Jews. The goal of the Jews was to get rid of Jesus by killing Him. But that is not easy because only the Romans have this authority. What that means is that in order to execute Jesus, to get Pilate agree to condemn Him, they must find Him guilty of a capital offense in the Jewish and Roman courts, even though He has not killed anybody or tried to kill anybody or committed a capital offense in either set of laws. That is a substantial difficulty, and it explains they way things unfold that night. Continuing in John 18, there is a brief interrogation by Annas, the former high priest. That gets nowhere because Jesus says Annas could have heard His teachings any time he wanted. Then He is taken to Caiaphas in the Sanhedrin. Remember, the Bible is not interested in giving a court record, but rather a story of redemption, of salvation, and what that story has to do with us. So the times and places of these events are not always entirely clear.

The judicial day in Rome began at 6 a.m., which would have been when Pilate received his business. They usually wanted to be done by 10 a.m. In order to celebrate the Passover, the Jews wanted to get it over with, and do it without getting defiled. Jesus is arrested at night and goes to Annas and Caiaphas, which might have lasted from 3 to 6 a.m. Because the trial could not legally take place at night, these proceedings were informal. They probably had to wait until the first daylight for them to be ratified when they got the evidence to condemn Jesus. We notice they are operating at night, which is not right, not legal. But you have to be very careful about the illegalities of Jesus’ trial. These are legal people, who do not want to break the law, but only bend it, until it does what they want it to. They are going to use the law as their weapon.

In Matthew 26:57 and following the Jewish leaders try to come up with witnesses who will convict Jesus of a capital crime. Of course they do not have one. So they instead turn to false witnesses who succeed at doing nothing except contradict each other. They get close at one point when two stand up and say, “This fellow said, ‘I am going to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’” Jesus

did say something close to that in John 2:19, but the temple He was talking about was His body. Even if it were true that He said He would destroy the temple and build it in three days, that is not a capital crime. So His accusers are not getting anywhere. They want to kill Jesus, and maybe they are beginning to get weary or disturbed, so the high priest gets an idea: maybe Jesus would incriminate Himself.

They give Him a question recalling His implicit claims of deity. The high priest says that Jesus is charged under oath, sworn in solemnly, and then asks Him if He is the Christ, the Son of God. We have seen how the Jewish priests like to put Jesus on the horn of the dilemma. Here is the dilemma: if Jesus says that He is not the Christ, He is a liar, so He will not do that. If He says He is the Messiah, it would not be His death, but it would mean trouble with Rome because if you claim to be Messiah, you are claiming to be king of the Jews. With such a claim would come certain expectations that He would lead the Jews, which could lead to charges of sedition. But, the claim was not a capital crime in Jewish courts because many, if not all, Jews thought the Messiah would be human. A claim to be Messiah is not necessarily a claim to be God. But if He is going to be quoted, Jesus says He wants to do it His way. He wants to say “yes” on His terms. All four Gospels use identical language at this point because it is so important. They ask Jesus, “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Our English translations give Jesus’ response as, “You said it,” or “You have said it.” That is a way to say, “If you ask Me point blank, then I have to say ‘yes.’”

But once Jesus has said “yes,” He adds that He is not just a human Messiah. In Matthew 26:64 we read, “‘Yes, it is as you say,’” Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’” That sounds like deity. It sounds like Psalm 110 in which the Messianic figure is equal to the Ancient of Days. Now the Jewish leaders tear their clothes. Were they really upset? We will never know. These were no fools, and they had to be celebrating too. They knew they had caught Him because He just claimed to be God and that is blasphemy. He said He was the Messiah, which is a king, and that is sedition from Jesus. Now from His own mouth, in telling the truth, He provided them their charge of blasphemy, which they would use against Him. He was careful, however, to say He was not the military Messiah; He was one coming on the clouds of heaven, not coming with an army, but they were going to twist that statement. He said He was king and that means He was a rival of Caesar. Regardless of what Jesus had said, He would be in trouble, so He said what was true. Yet once again, we see that His life was not taken from Him, but He laid it down of His own accord because He loved His friends.

After that the Sanhedrin convened formally and ratified their decree. They did not need any further witnesses; Jesus indicted Himself. They spat at Him and struck Him. They mocked Him, saying if He was a prophet, why did He not prophecy who hit Him? Still, we are not quite in the story yet, except by way of sorrow for Christ. Are we in the story, or do we watch and grieve or get angry?

There is another figure interwoven throughout, who is now mentioned in Matthew 26:69-75. Jesus, in Gethsemane, said that He was troubled that the disciples were not able to watch with Him. He warned them that they would fall away. Peter said he would not, but Jesus said he would. And now we find Peter, after all, denying Christ just as Jesus said He would. What do we make of it? It is like all sin, simultaneously mystifying and all too understandable. It is mystifying that Peter, so full of resolve, who spent three years with Jesus, could turn on Him so completely. Yet it is understandable how, caught off guard, following behind Jesus, showing some courage and then being called out by witnesses, he said, “No. No.” He even called down oaths on himself; he swore, “I do not know the man.” And then, of course, the cock crowed and he remembered Jesus’ words.

What can we make of this scene? Jesus is standing in front of His questioners denying nothing, while Peter cowers before his questioners and denies everything. While Jesus offers up His life for Peter, Peter will not even offer up a word for Jesus. He does not simply deny Jesus; he does it repeatedly, vehemently, solemnly. He does it from his position as a disciple, as predicted, despite his resolutions to the contrary. What does this teach us? For one thing, it teaches us exactly how far human resolve can go. Kierkegaard once likened the religious man to a stone skipping on a lake. It is a very impressive thing if you get a good smooth lake and a good smooth stone. It hits the water and pops in the air and it will skip many times over. But you know what happens every time you skip a stone? It is going to sink because stones are heavier than water. It is going to sink like the rock it is. And that is what human resolve is like: very impressive in the short run, but in the end, we will sink like stones if we try on our own efforts to please God. So, with whom do we identify in the story? Unfortunately, it is Peter. You know the song, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” What is the answer? Yes. I suppose that just about every one of us would do what Peter did. You decide if that is true or not.

Nonetheless, Peter’s failure is by no means all negative. There is much good news in it. For one thing, Jesus predicted it, so it illustrates again that Jesus is in control. Jesus also said, “Satan will demand to sift you like wheat,” but then He told Peter he would be restored too. That is really significant. Jesus predicts and controls and He also forgives. But Peter wept bitterly. We can hardly imagine what Peter must have been going through when the rooster crowed, when he caught Jesus’ eye, as one of the Gospels says. But whatever that misery was, it was not the end. Peter was restored and forgiven. He was reinstated as an apostle, as one of the leaders of the church. This is sad but fabulous news. If Peter could be restored for that, we can be restored for anything. God’s grace and love and mercy is far greater than any evil we can do. If you are under shame right now, God can restore you too, just as He restored Peter. Whatever you may have done, if you are repentant, even if you are still doing it, God will forgive it as well. That is the good news. If there is hope for Peter, there is hope for all.

Focusing again on Christ’s story, whatever you have endured, Jesus endured more. Not only that, but He endured it completely unjustly. Recently I was accused of something of which I was innocent—mostly. Don’t you hate that? When you are ninety percent innocent and ten percent guilty, you want to admit you are wrong, but it is hard to say that and say you are a little bit right too. That situation makes the accusation sting more because you know it is partly true. The accusations against Jesus stung more because He did not deserve it at all. Furthermore, because He bore it entirely alone, it was worse still. It is a miserable thing to bear sorrow by yourself. Jesus not only bore it by Himself, but it was while His dearest friends left Him at the hour of His greatest need. He had told them they would and they swore they would not—but they did. Jesus knows and can identify with us in whatever sorrow we have.

The account of Jesus before Pilate in Matthew 27:11 and following is not a verbatim report, a legal report. It would not even make sense or be edifying to have a mostly legal report. This is an investigation recorded in order to illumine things for us. This is teaching us about Jesus and about sin, particularly Pilate’s sin. As I said, the Jews have to politicize their accusations against Jesus. They take the statement that He is the Messiah, His blasphemy charge, and they manipulate it so that it is now a charge of sedition. They say in Luke 23:2, “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king.”

They thought that Pilate, if fed the right information, would simply acquiesce and give his stamp of approval and sign off at once. But Pilate takes some interest and asks Jesus if He is king of the Jews. Again, Jesus answers, “You have said it,” and then qualifies that He is not a political kind of a king. He is rather a king of a spiritual army. If He were a military king, His disciples would have fought for Him.

Pilate begins to be convinced fairly rapidly that Jesus is innocent, and that the Jews are doing this out of envy. But instead of taking a strong stand for his convictions, he tries to evade the issue. He tries to send Jesus off to Herod Antipas because he learns that He is a Galilean, but that does not work. Then Pilate tries to make Jesus the one prisoner they let go on the Passover. Pilate also tries beating Him a little bit. Josephus says, "They lashed Him until His bones were bare." Pilate wants to treat Him like a madman: beat Him a little bit, take care of things, and let Him go. But the Jewish leaders will not let Him go; they want to kill Him. Pilate has made a deadly compromise: he knew Jesus was innocent but allowed Him to be beaten. He also offered the alternative of releasing Barabbas. So now when they say a beating is not enough, and they do not want Jesus released, but Barabbas, Pilate is already in a weak position.

Then the Jews pull out their last trick in John 19:12. They say, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." What they are telling Pilate is they would tell Caesar. And if he will release someone who is guilty of sedition and Caesar finds out, Pilate would pay a price. So he acquiesces and sends Jesus off to be crucified.

What do we say about that? It is easy to beat up on Pilate for his compromised morals but Pilate proves again that Jesus brings out what is in us. When you encounter Jesus, your soul is laid bare. And what is laid out about Pilate is that he is a political man. He does not act out of righteousness, but to preserve or advance his career. If an innocent man lacks power, than an innocent man will die if Pilate's career calls for it. Your soul will lay bare in front of Jesus, whether your spiritual life or your particular form of spiritual death. So it was with Pilate as it is with us even today.