The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

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Chapter 1: Jesus in Gethsemane

Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, “Sit ye here while I go and pray yonder.” And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith he unto them, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: Tarry ye here, and watch with me.” And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.” And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, “What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, “O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.” And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, “Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.” (Matthew 26:36-45)

Introduction

The agony of Christ in Gethsemane “is a passage of Scripture which we should always approach with peculiar reverence. The history which it records is one of the ‘deep things of God.’ While we read it, the words of Exodus should come across our minds, ‘Put off thy shoes from off thy feet; the place whereon thou standest is holy ground’ (Exod. iii. 5).”1 “Here we come to the Holy of Holies of our Lord’s life on earth. This is a mystery like that which Moses saw when the bush burned with fire, and was not consumed.”2 Although our Lord’s whole earthly life was one of suffering and humiliation, it is at Gethsemane that Christ’s suffering is intensified beyond human comprehension. It is as though the sword of Jehovah’s wrath against the sin of the world was awakened at that time. “The clouds had been gathering a good while, and looked back…. But now the storm began in earnest.”3 “Hitherto, we have seen the preparative for Christ’s sufferings; now we enter upon the bloody scene.”4 During His life the Savior had walked the path of rejection, hardship and sorrow; but, at this pivotal point in history He begins a steep descent toward the horrifying curse of God for the sins of the elect (Gal. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:21).

It is for this reason that the passion of Jesus begins with His intense agony at Gethsemane.5 The last hours of the Savior’s life from late Thursday night (14th Nisan or the 6th of

4 Ibid.
5 The term “passion” comes from the Greek word *pascho* which means to suffer anguish, to suffer death. The most profound and important occurrence of this word in the N.T. is found in Acts 1:3 which reads: “To whom also he
April) to Friday afternoon contain the events that form the central core of the gospel message. In
the passion narratives our Lord’s formal teaching ministry is over; “apart from a few key
sayings, Jesus is silent. The time for teaching, and therefore the time for response to Jesus’
appeal, is past. There remains only the work he came to do.”

The Place of Agony

The gospels of Mark and Matthew identify this special place of inner conflict at
Gethsemane (Mt. 26:36; Mk. 14:32). Luke uses a general term “the place” (Lk. 22:40). All three
synoptic gospels imply that Gethsemane was on “the Mount of Olives” (Mk 14:26; Mt. 26:30;
Lk. 22:39). The apostle John identifies it as a “garden” across the brook Kidron (Jn 18:1). According to the ancient historian Josephus, “the suburbs of Jerusalem abounded with charming
gardens and ‘paradises’ (War vi. 1:1).”

The word Gethsemane is a Greek translation of the Hebrew and Aramaic words *gat semane* which mean “oil-press.” It is very likely that Gethsemane was an olive orchard and not simply a private garden. This orchard was probably on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. To get to this secluded place the disciples would have walked with Jesus east of Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley and the brook Kidron. The Hebrew word Kidron “means ‘dark waters’—
emblematic of that black stream through which He was about to pass. The Kidron was on the
east side of the city, dividing Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives (Josephus). It was on the west
side of the city that He was crucified: thus did the Son of Righteousness complete His atoning
circuit!”

John’s description of Jesus entering a garden (*kapos*) implies that it was a walled garden.
Stones are abundant on the Mount of Olives and were often organized by farmers into crude
fences. The word translated “place” (*chorion*) can be translated “plot of land” (cf. Jn. 4:5; Ac.
1:18; 4:34; 5:3; 28:7). The same word is sometimes rendered piece of land, field, land, lands or
possessions. It is likely that Gethsemane was a working farm. Our Lord may have known the
owner. It is thus possible that this orchard still contained a working olive press.

The time that Jesus arrived at Gethsemane is not specifically stated in any of the
accounts. Therefore, commentators offer a wide range of possible times. A few say eight or nine
(e.g., Fairbairn), others nine or ten (e.g., Morison) and still others as late as eleven to twelve o’
clock. “Lichenstein (411) puts it at midnight: first, because usually of this hour the supper was
ended; second, because if He had left earlier, there would have been too great [a] delay at
Gethsemane.” The fact that the disciples could not stay awake (Mk. 14:40; Mt. 26:43) indicates
that these events probably took place very late in the evening.

shewed himself alive after his passion” [GK. *pathein*]. “The fact that the Passion is mentioned in the opening of the
Acts shows that it was the central core of the message taught throughout the apostolic period” (W. White Jr.,
“Passion” in Merrill C. Tenney, general editor, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Grand Rapids:
Zondervan, 1975, 76], 4: 605).


brook Kidron that David and his closest followers crossed after being betrayed by Ahithophel (see 2 Sam. 15:23ff.).
David the king, a vivid type of Christ, crossed this same brook in tears.

There are a number of things that merit our attention regarding the place of Christ’s agony.

(1) Gethsemane was a familiar place to Jesus and the apostles. Luke 22:39 reads, “Coming out, He went to the Mount of Olives, as He was accustomed, and His disciples also followed Him.” “There was one particular place on the mount of Olives, to which our Lord was in the habit of going, which was well-known to all the disciples, and to Judas Iscariot among the rest.”

This explains how Judas the traitor knew where to find the Savior and led the armed band of enemies to the very spot where he was praying. “To take any one prisoner by night of course requires an intimate knowledge of his habits, and of the place where he is. If Judas therefore had not guided the party which took Jesus, they might have spent the night in searching for Him in vain.”

This fact tells us two important things. First, the betrayal by Judas (an apostle, an insider) was crucial for the arrest of Christ. Second, it emphasizes the fact that our Lord willingly laid His life down for His people. “Jesus goes obediently to a fate which ‘must’ happen in fulfillment of the Scriptures. The Son of God is willingly carrying out his Father’s purpose. There is no sense of his being the unfortunate victim of forces too strong for him; he is in charge.”

Christ knew that Judas was going to betray Him (Jn. 13:27), yet he went willingly and bravely to the place of His arrest. John’s account says, “And Judas, who betrayed Him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with His disciples” (Jn. 18:2). Thomas Goodwin writes, “Our Lord and Savior knew that He should be taken by Judas, and that this was the place appointed by His Father wherein He should be taken; for the 4th verse tells us ‘Jesus therefore, knowing all things that should come upon him,’ etc. He knew that Judas would be there that night, and, therefore, like a valiant champion, He cometh into the field first, afore His enemy. He goeth thither to choose, and singles out this place on purpose.”

We should not be surprised that our Lord went to an old familiar place to suffer and pray. He liked certain isolated areas where He could draw near to God. It was a place of many former meditations and interchanges with God. It would be wise and expedient for us to find certain peaceful places where we can delight to commune with Jehovah.

(2) Christ’s choice of the Mount of Olives for the beginning of His passion had sober meanings for the nation of Israel. When Jehovah placed the covenant nation under judgment and captivity, His divine glory (the visible symbol of His special presence) departed from the temple in Jerusalem and stood over the Mount of Olives, which is directly east of Jerusalem. Ezekiel writes, “So the cherubim lifted up their wings, with wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was high above them. And the glory of the Lord went up from amidst the city and stood on the mountain which is on the east side of the city” (11:22-23). God’s only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the greater Temple, was now leaving the covenant nation at the insistence of the nation itself. The agony and passion of the Savior brought salvation to those who believed but also judgment and death to His enemies.

Not only did the Mount of Olives remind the Jews of God’s departure from the nation, but it was also the place where Jehovah would appear to crush the heathen nations and deliver His people. Zechariah writes, “And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west,

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11 Ibid.
making a very large valley; half of the Mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south” (Zech. 14:4).

The mountain where Jesus begins His passion is the same place where He ascends to heaven (Ac. 1:12) and returns in victory. The cleft in the mountain that represents our deliverance from Satan, sin and death was secured by the agony, suffering and sacrifice of Christ. The valley of deliverance for both Jew and Gentile was cut by the sinless blood of the Son of God.

(3) The place of agony is appropriate to our Lord’s redemptive work in that the olive was a symbol of peace. Even in modern times the phrase “to offer the olive branch” means to offer peace. “Under that great solemn Passover moon there bent down One in infinite agony who is our Olive, our Peace. Let us repeat these words to the soul, till they become tender by gracious familiarity. ‘He is our Peace: he hath made both one’ [Eph. 2:14].”

Further, there is no tree which in its appearance is more suggestive of suffering than the olive tree. “It twists and winds and turns about as though it were in agony. It has to draw up oil out of the flinty rock, and it seems to do so with great labour and travail.” This olive orchard, on that moonlit night, was no doubt beautiful and peaceful. But like our Lord, who was experiencing agony in His soul, the trees even appeared to be twisting and groaning in pain.

(4) The garden of Gethsemane was appropriate for a soul struggle because it was a place of meditation. The greatest conflict that Jesus had to endure and the most intense sufferings inflicted upon Him all took place in His soul. While we do not in the least want to downplay the pain endured by His physical body, the mental anguish of experiencing God’s unmitigated wrath clearly troubled Him the most. In this quiet place of meditation, the horror His soul endured is nothing less than a death-struggle. When He entered this fierce struggle, He prostrated Himself in prayer to His Father.

(5) There is a sad ending for this lovely orchard in that the very trees that witnessed the agony of the Savior were cut down by the Romans and used in their siege works of the city. “Josephus informs us that the Romans, at their siege ‘cut down all the trees that were in the immediate neighborhood of the city, and for ninety furlongs round about’ (War vi. 1:1).” The very trees whose ground soaked up the bloody sweat and tears of the Son of God became siege equipment for the destruction of Christ’s enemies, the persecutors of His people. If we do not trust in the sufferings of Jesus and lay hold of His perfect redemption our end will be destruction.

In modern-day Israel, on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, there is a small-enclosed area of eight very ancient olive trees. These trees are often shown to tourists and it is claimed that they are some of the original trees of Gethsemane. Such a claim, however, is extremely unlikely, if not impossible, given Josephus’ account of the destruction of the city. The present trees probably date to the middle ages.

(6) A number of church fathers and even some modern commentators see a contrast between Gethsemane and the Garden of Eden. More specifically, they see a contrast between the failure of the first Adam in paradise and the triumph of the second Adam in the garden of Gethsemane. In his commentary on the gospel of John, Arthur W. Pink beautifully notes this contrast:

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The entrance of Christ into the Garden at once reminds us of Eden. The contrasts between them are indeed most striking. In Eden, all was delightful; in Gethsemane, all was terrible. In Eden, Adam and Eve parleyed with Satan; in Gethsemane, the last Adam sought the face of His Father. In Eden, Adam sinned; in Gethsemane, the Savior suffered. In Eden, Adam fell; in Gethsemane, the Redeemer conquered. The conflict in Eden took place by day; the conflict in Gethsemane was waged at night. In the one, Adam fell before Satan; in the other, the soldiers fell before Christ. In Eden the race was lost; in Gethsemane Christ announced, “Of them whom thou givest me I lost none” (John 18:9). In Eden, Adam took the fruit from Eve’s hand; in Gethsemane, Christ received the cup from His Father’s hand. In Eden, Adam hid himself; in Gethsemane, Christ boldly showed Himself. In Eden, God sought Adam; in Gethsemane, the last Adam sought God! From Eden Adam was “driven;” from Gethsemane Christ was “led.” In Eden the “sword” was drawn (Gen. 3:24); in Gethsemane the “sword” was sheathed (John 18:11).17

The Nature of Christ’s Suffering

Having arrived at the place of prayer, Jesus enters a conflict in His soul that is nothing less than supreme agony. The soul of our Lord sustained a whole range of intense, excruciating, and negative emotions. It is as though the Savior came to find sweet communion with God and, instead, found Himself dropping into the abyss, into an emotional cauldron of unimaginable suffering. It is a scene that is painful to behold; for we see the rock of our salvation, the beautiful and noble Prince laid prostrate under the burden of our own iniquities. “He was now bearing the iniquities which the Father laid upon him, and by his sorrow and amazement, he accommodated himself to his undertaking. The sufferings he was entering were for our sins; they were all made to meet upon him, and he knew it. As we are obliged to be sorry for our particular sins, so was he grieved for the sins of us all.”18

There are a number of things that need to be noted regarding our Savior’s suffering.

(1) The agony that Jesus endured was multifaceted. The blows that encompassed His soul came from every corner. His suffering was not simple, but complex. We can only begin to understand this suffering by noting that He had to suffer the penalty that sin deserved for millions and millions of people. “Hence it is part of His calling to quail in anguish before our God…. One would need to have been in hell for some time in order to understand what it is that is tearing Jesus apart in the garden.”19 Let us now focus our eye of faith upon what the Savior did for us. Let us examine the various terms used in the gospels to describe this suffering.

a) The first emotion we encounter is found only in Mark’s gospel. In Mark 14:33 we are told that Jesus was “greatly amazed” (Matthew 26:37 says “sorrowful”). The word ekthambeisthai (ekthambeo), translated as “sore amazed” (KJV), “deeply distressed” (NKJV, NIV), “very distressed” (NASB), “greatly amazed” (RSV), “thoroughly alarmed” (Wuest), or “appalled” (Lane), is a strong term that means “to be amazed or terrified.” It can, in certain contexts, be translated “to be deeply distressed.” Mark uses the word here in its strongest sense of shock and awe mixed with terror and dread. “The Lord was overwhelmed with sorrow, but His first feeling was one of terrified surprise.”20 “Jesus came to be with the Father for an

18 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:395.
20 Henry Barclay Swete, Commentary on Mark (Grand Rapids: Kregel [1913] 1977), 342.
interlude before his betrayal, but found hell rather than heaven opened before him, and he staggered.”  Matthew Henry writes, “[Ekthambeisthai] bespeaks something like that horror of great darkness, which fell upon Abraham (Gen. xv. 12), or, rather, something much worse, and more frightful. The terrors of God set themselves in array against him, and he allowed himself the actual and intense contemplation of them.”

Our Lord knew from the beginning that His path was always directed toward Golgotha, that He would become accursed for our sakes. Yet, it seems that at this time, in the garden, the outer darkness of alienation from God and the terrors and sorrows that such alienation brings pressed upon Him in a new, vivid, and terrifying manner. His soul was being scourged with waves of dark fear and immense sorrow. No human who ever lived experienced terror like our Savior. No one ever felt the sorrow and heart agony that our Lord felt. “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

b) Another emotion that Jesus encountered in the garden was deep sorrow mixed with grief. Matthew says that “He began to be sorrowful” (lupeisthai) (26:37). Then, in the next verse, he intensifies the same word by adding peri. The word translated as sorrowful (KJV, NKJV, RSV) or grieved (NASB) means to be sad, grieved or distressed with sorrow. When the prefix peri is added (perilupos), it means to be “deeply sorrowful,” “afflicted beyond measure” or “very sad.” The same word is used of the rich young ruler when he realized he could not follow Christ (Mk. 10:22; Mt. 19:22; lupoumenos) and of King Herod after the daughter of Herodias asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter (Mt. 14:9).

The very depth of Christ’s sorrow is revealed by both Matthew and Mark who say, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death” (Mt. 26:38; Mk. 14:34). The expression “sorrowful unto death” means sorrowful to the utmost degree. “Jesus tells Peter, James and John that his sorrow is so great that he is hardly able to bear it. The forgiveness of sins that he offers (cf. v. 28) will be accomplished only at an incomprehensible cost that goes far beyond physical death.”

“[His soul was full of sorrow, until he seemed to reach the utmost limit of endurance, and to be at the very gate of death.” He was made sin for us, and was thus sorrowful; he fully knew malignity of the sins he was to suffer for; and having the highest degree of love to God, who was offended by them was exceedingly sorrowful unto death. Ambrose says of this passage: “[T]here is no instance in which I admire more his kindness and his majesty; for he would not have done so much for me, if he had not taken upon him my feelings. He grieved for me, who had no cause of grief for himself; and, laying aside the delights of the eternal Godhead, he experiences the affliction of my weakness. I boldly call it sorrow, because I preach the cross. For, he took upon him not the appearance, but the reality, of incarnation. It was therefore necessary that he should experience grief, that he might overcome sorrow, and not shut it out; for the praise of fortitude is not bestowed on those who are rather stupefied than pained by wounds.”

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21 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:552.
22 Ibid.
26 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:552.
In Jesus’ description of his soul suffering we find a number of illusions to Old Testament language. For example, in Psalm 42, the psalmist repeatedly asks: “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” (vs. 5, 6, 11; cf. Ps. 43:5). When David contemplates an experience of deliverance by God, he writes, “I cried unto the LORD with my voice; with my voice unto the LORD did I make my supplication. I poured out my complaint before Him; I shewed before Him my trouble. When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then thou knowest my path” (Ps. 142: 1-3). The phrase “to the point of death” is an echo of Jonah who said, “It is right for me to be angry, even to death” (4:9b). The suffering of David and other psalmists pales in comparison to what our Lord endured. This is because His work was vicarious: “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isa. 53:4).

c) Matthew and Mark also tell us that Christ’s soul was “very heavy” (KJV) or “deeply distressed” (NKJV) (Mk. 14:33; Mt. 26:37). The verb ademoneo, translated as “distressed” (NASB), “sore troubled” (RSV), “be troubled” (NIV), “greatly distressed” (Morison), “worried” (Lenski), “grievously troubled” (Lane), carries the notion of intense emotional pain related to a strong concern, anxiety, uneasiness or anguish. This verb in classic Greek was “employed by Xenophon and Plato to denote extreme anxiety and anguish.”

In Greek literature of the 1st century A.D., it is used to describe someone who is “excessively concerned.” Lenski argues that in this context it means “to be filled with uneasiness and dread.” The same verb is used in only one other place in the New Testament where Paul tells the Philippians that Epaphroditus “was distressed” or “greatly troubled” because the Philippian church had heard that he was sick (Phil. 2:26).

That our Lord was “greatly troubled” in His soul in this context is understandable, for while He had suffered and been troubled before, “now they became intensified into the superlative degree, so that He could not refrain from strong crying and tears.” Jesus “bowed down as if an enormous weight rested on his soul as indeed it did.” He knew that the sin of the whole world would soon crush Him in the wine press of His Father’s holy wrath. He was seized with trembling, anguish, sorrow and extreme concern, for He was about to be an atonement for sin. His fellowship with the Father was eclipsed when He took upon Himself the curse of God’s holy law.

d) Another word used to describe the suffering of Jesus is found in Luke’s account of Gethsemane. Luke tells us that the Savior was in agony. “And being in agony, he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (22:44). The Greek word (agonia), translated “agon” (KJV, NKJV, RSV, ASV, NASB) or “anguish” (NIV), originally referred to “anxiety” or “inner tension;” “most strictly it indicates the ‘supreme concentration of powers’ in face of imminent decisions or disasters.” Ancient “medics used agonia only with reference to severe mental distress.”

In Luke’s account God sends an angel to strengthen our Lord almost at the very moment that Christ’s inner struggle is reaching its highest peak. “There is in the aorist participle a suggestion of a growing intensity in the struggle, which is not conveyed by the simple being.

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29 A.T. Robertson, 212.
30 R.C.H. Lenski, Interpretation of Matthew, 1038.
31 James Morrison, 543.
Literally, though very awkwardly, it is, *having become in an agony.*35 “The mind and the body that were sinking lower and lower beneath the strain rallied powerfully to face the full horror of the curse and the wrath that were impending. That is why Jesus went on to pray more intensively in this supreme moment.”36 Of all the conflicts, battles and tumults in the whole history of the world, nothing has compared to this conflict. This was the decisive battle on which the fate of the whole world depended. Our Lord stared sin, the curse, death, hell and separation with His precious Father in the face and experienced a fierce conflict in His soul. Although as a perfect sinless man He experienced a hurricane of painful emotions and was dealt a blow near unto death, His resolve to obey His Father’s will never wavered.

We must never forget that the path of total victory over sin, hell, the devil and this evil world is stained with the tears, sweat and blood of our precious Savior. “The Head must be thrust under the breakers of wrath in order that the members may remain standing in freedom and joy. Jesus, the Mediator who is the Guarantor of a better covenant, is punished and afflicted for the sake of others. He must suffer all sorrows for them, must writhe because of awful anguish in order that the members of His body may without any dread at all see God’s judgment seat standing behind the arena, the guillotine, [the concentration camp] or the death bed.”37 He wipes away every tear from our eyes because He filled that quiet moonlit night with his crying; He watered the cold earth with His tears and stained it with His sinless blood. In order for us to understand the extreme nature of Jesus’ suffering, Luke the physician tells us: “Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (22:44). It has been thought by some that the passage only means that the sweat was like, or similar to, drops of blood. The term “like” in Scripture, however, can signify not only resemblance, but also the identical thing itself. The Savior’s suffering was so intense that he suffered what physicians call *hematidrosis.* “It must be born in mind that the human nature of Jesus was sinless, and therefore very sensitive. When these factors—extreme anguish, earnest supplication, unparalleled sensitivity—are combined, the resulting strain can easily cause subcutaneous capillaries to dilate to such an extent that they will burst. And when this happens, as it was almost bound to do, in the vicinity of sweat glands, blood and sweat will be exuded together. This can happen over a large part of the body.”38 “With the perspirings on his face, and huge drops on his brow man toils for the bread that perishes; but bread is only the staff of life: when Christ toiled for life itself to give it to men he sweat, not the common perspiration of the outward form, but the blood which flows from the very heart itself.”39

Beloved, we must meditate on these awful sufferings of the Savior. Behold the bloody sweat of the sinless Son of God, “which the violence of Christ’s grief and sorrow for our sins forced out of His veins!”40 With the eye of faith, study and lay hold of this bloody, suffering Man who left behind the shining courts of His eternal glory to suffer supreme humiliation. Look at this poor, feeble and despised man as He conquers sin and death. Survey this dark and dreadful scene where the spotless Lamb suffered not for Himself but for the iniquities of us all. From the depths of His heart to the sweat on His skin He suffered for us. “Oh the love of Jesus! Oh the weight of sin! Oh the debt of gratitude which you and I owe to him!”41

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The Reasons for Christ’s Suffering

As we look at this scene of immense suffering by Jesus, the crucial question that immediately comes to mind is why? Why did our Lord experience such terror, dread, sorrow and anguish in the garden?

(1) One obvious reason is that He suffered in anticipation of what lay before Him. Although we can never know what was in our Savior’s mind at this time, we can surmise from His reactions at Gethsemane that He at the least became vividly aware of the sufferings immediately before Him. Although the gospel accounts make it very clear that Jesus knew: He would be delivered into the hands of men (Mk. 9:31) and to the Gentiles (Mk. 10:33); He must suffer and be rejected (Mk. 8:31); He would be mocked, scourged, and spat upon (Mk. 10:34); He must be condemned to death (Mk. 10:33) and killed (Mk. 8:31); His own disciples would forsake Him (Mk. 14:27; Mt. 26:31); Judas would betray Him (Mk. 14:21; Mt. 26:24); and His own nation would reject Him long before Gethsemane (Jn. 1:11), the reality of the full horror of the curse and the wrath of God was encompassing Him in a new, more powerful manner. “He had a foretaste of what it meant to be ‘forsaken’ by his heavenly Father. And it is not unreasonable to assume that during these dreadful periods of anguish Satan and His demons assaulted him, with the intention of causing Him to turn aside from the path of obedience to God?”

This point can be deduced from Christ’s prayers to have the cup removed. The metaphor of the cup indicates that Jesus saw himself confronted with the chalice of God’s judgment and wrath against sin. Mark adds the statement, “He…prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him” (14:35). Then a little later when His arrest is imminent our Lord says, “The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (14:41). The term “hour” refers to the period of time set by God for the atoning sacrifice of the Son, “the hour in which God would remove all hindrances and let the hatred of the foes of Jesus have its full sway. This hour was now fully come—a few moments, and it would be here.” Since Jesus repeatedly prayed to the Father to spare Him from the coming wrath that was about to consume Him and would climax in the ultimate suffering exhibited by our Lord’s death cry “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me” (Mk. 15:34; Mt. 27:46), His fear, anxiety, dread, surprise and anguish had a future-oriented aspect to it.

At Gethsemane we see Christ in His weakness. This is one of the clearest portions of Scripture to portray the Savior in His true humanity. The Word who became flesh (Jn. 1:14) had all the weakness and infirmities of true manhood, yet without sin. The term “flesh,” as it applies to Jesus in His frailties, weaknesses and infirmities, indicates that even though the Savior was

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43 The symbolism of the cup full of God’s wrath is common in Scripture. “For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is fully mixed, and He pours it out; surely its dregs shall all the wicked of the earth drain and drink down” (Ps. 75:80). “Awake, awake! Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of His fury; you have drunk the dregs of the cup of trembling and drained it out!” (Isa. 51:17; cf. 51:22). “For thus says the Lord God of Israel to me: ‘Take this wine cup of fury from My hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send you, to drink it. And they will drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them’” (Jer. 25:15-16; cf. Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:33-35). “The cup of the Lord’s right hand will be turned against you, and utter shame will be on your glory” (Hab. 2:16). The book of Revelation speaks of “the cup of His indignation” (14:10); “the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath” (16:19).
sinless and holy, His human nature was not yet glorified. He was ethically perfect, yet He had to suffer the weaknesses of human nature after the fall—hunger, thirst, weariness, toil, sorrow, grief, shock, fear, pain, wounding and even death itself. “From his cradle to the grave he bare all the infirmities of our nature, with all the dolorous and grievous effects of them. Hence all his days he was...a ‘man of sorrows’, filled with them, never free from them; familiarly ‘acquainted with grief,’ as a companion that never departed from him.”45 But it was toward the end of His days, “in his last suffering, when all his sorrows, trials, and temptations came to a head”46 to the point of tears, bloody sweat and, finally, death itself.

The reality and exhibition of Christ’s human passions refutes some common misconceptions in our day. One such misconception equates a strong faith with stoicism or a total lack of emotion altogether. According to this view the Christian ideal is something more akin to Star Trek’s Spock than the Savior who agonized and shed tears. This view perhaps arose because human passion so often exceeds its due bounds and proper restraint.47 We must remember that Jesus exhibited strong emotions (even anger) yet with total purity, without any stain of sin. People who attempt to find something unseemly in our Lord’s behavior at Gethsemane have much more in common with Greek paganism than Scripture.

Another misconception looks at passion, emotions and suffering as an end in itself. This is the view of various ascetics and Romanists who seek suffering and pain as ends in themselves: hair shirts, chains, excessive fasting and so on. We must remember that Jesus’ suffering served a distinct purpose. He did not seek suffering for suffering’s sake, but to pay the penalty of the sins of His people. While it is true that Christians are called to suffer for Christ’s sake, they are not to go out of their way to seek it. Believers should avoid persecution and unjust suffering whenever lawfully possible.

(2) Although we must not lose sight of the fact that our Lord suffered in anticipation of God’s cup of wrath against sin, we also must not forget that the suffering in the garden itself was vicarious. That is, Jesus endured this sorrow, pain, fear, dread and terror in our place, on our behalf. This point is proven by the fact that, as a lamb without spot or blemish, the Savior did not and could not have justly suffered for Himself. As the second Adam, God’s Son battled and conquered evil to save us from our own miserable failure to obey God and ultimately delivered us from all fear and suffering. “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day” (Lk. 9:22).

Christ took upon Himself the fear, dread, shock and sorrow of the curse in order to deliver us from it. Our Lord had no horror of simply passing out of this world; rather, it was God’s wrath and vengeance against our sin that was soon to be placed upon Him to the uttermost that caused Him such torment and anguish of mind. “Our Lord’s suffering in the garden was caused by the burden of a world’s imputed sin, which then began to press upon Him in a peculiar manner. He had undertaken to be ‘sin for us,’—to be ‘made a curse for us,’—and to allow our iniquities to be laid on Himself. (2 Cor. v. 21. Gal. i113. Isai. liii. 6.)... We must cling firmly to

46 Ibid., 4:499.
47 Regarding the emotions of Christ, Matthew Henry writes, “[T]here was not the least disorder or irregularity in this commotion of his spirits; his affections rose not tumultuously, but under direction, and as they were called up, for he had no corrupt nature to mix with them, as we have. If water have a sediment at the bottom, though it may be clear while it stands still, yet, when shaken, it grows muddy; so it is with our affections: but pure water in a clean glass, though ever so much stirred, continues clear; and so it was with Christ” (5:552).
the old doctrine that Christ was ‘bearing our sins,’ both in the garden and on the cross. No other doctrine can ever explain the passage before us, or satisfy the conscience of guilty man.”

But one may ask: How can Jesus be suffering for sin and suffering in anticipation of the horrors of Golgotha at the same time? The answer is that the Savior’s work of redemption is an organic whole, a seamless garment. Further, the gospel accounts record a progress in His suffering. The Heidelberg catechism says that “all the time he lived on earth, but especially at the end of his life, he bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against sin…” (Answer to Question 37). Our Lord’s experience of suffering can be compared to a plant that from the beginning experiences growth, yet does not begin to flower until Gethsemane and the night of His betrayal. The Savior is totally aware that after the holy supper He will enter a new phase of His suffering. Thus, He said to the apostles, “With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Lk. 22:15). The suffering will continue and increase as the Lord moves closer to Golgotha. After Gethsemane, He is disowned and rejected by His own people. He is betrayed, arrested, bound, tried, condemned, tortured, crucified, slain and buried. “At the beginning of this dark way he speaks of not yet being alone, but that the Father is with him (John 16:32); but on the cross the Father’s name departs from his lips (Mt. 27:46).”

The only way to understand the suffering at Gethsemane is to view it as vicarious. Then, and only then, can we begin to fathom our Lord’s sudden fall into deep sorrow, perplexity, dread and anguish. It was at this time that God began forsaking Him. We must understand that the heart of the Savior’s suffering was not the hatred of His people, the blows, the insults, the mocking and the physical pain of scourging. The thing that caused the most suffering in Christ was the fact that His father was now leaving Him. Schilder writes,

This is God’s hour to forsake. Up to this time Jesus had to work. He had to administer the Passover, to give the Supper; He had to deliver prophetic discourses, to perturb Judas, to impel Satan, to wash the feet—he had to give, always to give. As Mediator He had to perform His daily work calmly. But the clock is striking now.

Now the Father thrusts Him into the abyss of perfect long-suffering, thrusts Him back from the luxury of the Mediator’s deed, which gives, into the pain of the Mediator’s forsakenness, which can only cry for help.

Now wrath flares up against Him, for He must know what it means to represent a host of condemned and yet be forsaken of all. God withholds the comfortings of the Spirit, the helpful whisperings of love, the assurances of faith. These He withholds in order that it may become manifest that the Lamb, in spite of His being forsaken, still peers into the darkness, looking for God. To have no voice other than the one voice of the eyes, and with that voice to ask, tremblingly: Where is my God? To be a prophet and to groan with the genuine groanings of all created beings—that is Christ in His awful solitude.

The key to understanding Gethsemane is to view it theocentrically. Jesus who was both God and man in one person; who was without original or actual sin, had a perfect, sweet communion with the Father at all times; in every moment of every day. There is a sense in which, in this olive orchard, Christ is struggling to bid His precious Father a farewell as He enters the depths of hell. If we can understand even a little: the relationship that our Lord had with God; what it meant to Him; how He treasured it; how it was the axis of his whole life, then

this sudden descent into this emotional abyss makes sense. Yes, it is true that God sent the angel to comfort His Son. But, He did so as He was turning away from Jesus. The Father sent that angel because He did not want His Son to die of a broken heart before He shed His blood on the cross. It was necessary that the Savior endure: a judicial process leading to condemnation as a common criminal even though He was innocent; a public execution where the innocent would die for the guilty; and, a death that involved the spilling of His blood by violence.

In Gethsemane our Lord’s suffering was vicarious and redemptive, but He was not yet experiencing the full brunt of God’s holy wrath. There would be no comforting angels while Christ hung on the cross. There would be no disciples to keep watch. The full eclipse of God’s love and favor toward the Son would occur while He hung on the tree and all His sinless blood dripped from His body. Look to Christ; have faith in His vicarious suffering. Yes, it is true that all our works are as filthy rags before God and that, apart from the Savior, we deserve the agony of an eternal hell. But, Jesus suffered in our place so that we could behold the face of God and fully experience His love.

Having noted the vicarious nature of our Lord’s suffering, it is important that we reject any theology or philosophy that argues that Jesus only suffered as an example, that His sufferings were only intended to teach the human race how to love one another. Such heretical teaching may be popular, but it is an explicit denial of the gospel. It presents the Savior as nothing more than a noble martyr and His suffering as something infinitely less than it really was. Our Lord was the surety for the elect, bore the curse of the law and forever removed the sting of death for us. “Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power” (Rev. 20:6).

(3) The suffering of Christ was also necessary for the discharge of His high priestly office. This point is brought out with clarity in Hebrews 5:7-8: “In the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.” Although Jesus Christ was fully God, He also was truly a man. He was made like us in every way with the single exception of any original or actual sin (Heb. 4:15). As a true man He learned obedience. Obviously, as one without any blemish of sin, He did not have to learn obedience, as we often do, by unlearning disobedience. Thus He declared, “I delight to do thy will, O God” (Ps. 40:8). “My meat is to do the will of Him who sent Me” (Jn. 4:34).

The Savior, in His humanity, had to go through the experience of what it was to obey. “He denied Himself, He renounced His own will, He ‘pleased not Himself’ (Rom. 15:3). There was no insubordination in Him, nothing disinclined to God’s law; instead, His obedience was voluntary and hearty. But by being ‘made under the law’ as Man, He ‘learned’ what Divine righteousness required of Him; by receiving the commandment to lay down His life (John 10:18), He ‘learned’ the extent of that obedience which holiness demanded. Again, as the Godman, Christ ‘learned’ obedience experimentally.”

Jesus did not learn obedience just by obeying God in an ordinary, everyday manner, “He learned obedience in the school of suffering’ (NEB). As the incarnate Son who came to be our mediator, our high priest before God, it was absolutely necessary for the Savior to learn obedience through every conceivable experience of suffering, trial and temptation. His obedience, of course, was toward God’s holy law; but, it was also an “obedience unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:8). It was such an obedience that conquered sin. It was such

an obedience that submitted to God’s will throughout the most severe temptations and sufferings. This is precisely the type of obedience that author of Hebrews speaks of. “It is with reference to this suffering that Jesus was made perfect; indeed, what is said here is a reaffirmation of the teaching already given in 2:10 that Christ was made ‘perfect through suffering.’ This perfection was progressively achieved as he moved on toward the cross, which marked the consummation of his suffering and obedience…. What was essential was that starting like Adam, with a pure human nature, he should succeed where Adam had failed. His sufferings both tested and victoriously endured, attested his perfection, free from failure and defeat. This he himself dramatically declared by his triumphant utterance from the cross: ‘It is finished’ (Jn 19:30).”

Thus, we see that our Lord’s suffering was crucial for His priestly work, wherein He offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin. It was also essential for His priestly work of intercession on our behalf. “For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings…. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:10, 17-18).

The Savior voluntarily placed Himself within the circle of human experience and was consecrated a merciful and faithful high priest through His own trials and sufferings (the Old Covenant high priest had his own sins and guilt to deal with and was only consecrated by the suffering and death of the clean animals which they offered in sacrifice at their consecration). “By His sufferings Christ became qualified and was solemnly appointed to be our Leader. It was by His sufferings that He vanquished all His and our foes, triumphing gloriously over them.” Jesus’ own personal experience of severe trials, temptations and sufferings uniquely qualified Him to be a merciful and faithful high priest who would compassionately guide our highest interests. “The bond of brotherhood, the identity of suffering and sorrow, fitted Him to be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.” The Savior’s fellowship in human suffering and His identification with our human mortal nature with all its weaknesses after the fall (except sin) makes Him the perfect priestly mediator between a holy God and sinful men. “The use of the perfect tense pepothen serves to emphasize that, though the temptation Christ suffered in the flesh is a thing of the past, yet its effect is permanent, the effect, namely, of compassion and understanding as he aids us in the hour of our temptations.”

(4) The Son of God had to suffer in order to actually bring to pass the salvation of many people. Evangelicals recognize that Jesus’ suffering until death was absolutely necessary for the removal (expiation) of the guilt of sin and for turning away the wrath of God (propitiation) that was directed at the sinner. But what many fail to recognize is that the very source of our faith, sanctification and perseverance is found in the Lord’s redemptive sufferings and glorious resurrection. Christ is “the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). He is “the captain of their salvation” made perfect through sufferings (Heb 2:10).

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52 Phillip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 187-188.
55 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, 123, footnote 123.
The word (Gk. archēgon) translated “captain” (KJV, NKJV), “author” (NASB, NIV), “leader” (NEB) or “pioneer” (RSV) was used in the days of the apostles to describe the leader of a military regiment who not only issued orders to his troops, but also took the lead in battle, who by his own personal example and skill in battle encouraged and inspired his solders unto victory. This word “signifies one who is both the source or initiator and the leader (archê plus agō), one who first takes action and then brings those on whose behalf he has acted to the intended goal.”

What the author of Hebrews is saying is that the Savior not only achieved a perfect redemption through His suffering but also leads us through our trials, temptations and suffering to glory. Our captain, or leader, who achieved salvation and glory through suffering, also, by virtue of our union with Him and His high priestly work, brings us safely through the battlefield of life. He achieved a perfect redemption in history when He lived on earth and He applies that perfect work to us throughout history.

The common evangelical Arminian or semi-Pelagian understanding of Christ’s suffering (that He makes salvation possible but not actual) makes Jesus’ leadership in salvation like a modern general who sits in his headquarters far behind the front looking at flags on a map waiting to see if his troops can achieve victory. We must reject all such humanistic nonsense in favor of the biblical concept of our Lord’s suffering; a suffering that secures redemption and the application of redemption toward God’s elect.

(5) Jesus is the perfect model for Christian suffering. If we become sorrowful through the various afflictions of this life, we must remember that the Savior, the Captain of our salvation, was exceedingly sorrowful before us and for us.

Before we look to Christ as the supreme example of how to endure suffering, it is important for us to face the reality that everyone who follows the Master must follow Him into suffering. This sober truth is taught throughout the New Testament. Our Lord told the disciples: “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you…Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (Jn. 15:18, 20). Peter tells believers that God has called us to eternal glory, “after you have suffered a while” (1 Pet. 5:10). He also speaks of Christians partaking of the Lord’s sufferings (1 Pet. 4:13). Paul tells the Corinthians that “the sufferings of Christ abound in us” (2 Cor. 1:5). He speaks about knowing “the fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil 3:10). Further, believers are called Christ’s body (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 12:12-27) and those who persecute the church are said to abuse the Lord Himself: “Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Ac. 9:4). As followers of the Lord we are not only called to suffer for our Savior, but also, in a certain sense, we suffer with Him. There is a sharing or partnership with Jesus in His suffering. This truth does not mean that the redemptive efficacy of our Lord’s work is in any sense extended or shared by believers. Such a view would explicitly contradict the biblical teaching that Christ’s work was unique, perfect, complete, sufficient, once for all. It would also undermine the doctrine that the experiences, works, sufferings and so forth of Christians are never meritorious before God.

There are a number of things to note regarding the imitation of Christ in His suffering.

a) Our Lord suffered, yet He did not complain, murmur or question the loving kindness of His Father. His statement, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even to death” (Mk. 14:34, Mt. 26:38), is a statement of fact to the disciples regarding His state and not a complaint against God or His providence. The true test of a person’s faith toward God often comes during times of suffering. When godly Job was told that all his possessions were either stolen or destroyed; that

56 Ibid, 100, footnote 88.
all his servants except one were killed; that his home was destroyed and his own children crushed to death under his house, God’s Word says that “Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and fell to the ground and worshiped” (Job 1:20). Note this patriarch’s beautiful statement of his dedication and faith to God in this severe trial. Job said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). The Holy Spirit comments on Job’s behavior by saying, “In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong” (Job 1:22).

Note that, like Jesus in His affliction, Job humbled himself, cast himself prostrate on the ground and looked to God. Also, like the Savior, Job had complete confidence in God’s providence toward Him. He believed in Jehovah; he knew God’s nature and character and thus gladly submitted to divine providence. Like Christ, Job had such a faith in God’s loving providence for him that he even looks beyond the secondary causes of His affliction and keeps his eye of faith upon the first cause. “He does not say, ‘The Lord gave, and the Sabeans and Chaldeans have taken away; God made me rich and the devil has made me poor;’” but, “Jehovah who gave it has taken it away.” The Savior did not complain about the unjust treatment that He was about to receive from wicked sinful men but said, “Father, I am willing to drink your cup. I will steadfastly submit to your will.” Regarding Job’s response to suffering Matthew Henry writes,

He adored God in both. When all was gone he fell down and worshipped. Note, Afflictions must not divert us from, but quicken us to, the exercises of religion. Weeping must not hinder sowing, nor hinder worshipping. He eyed not only the hand of God, but the name of God, in his afflictions, and gave glory to that: Blessed be the name of the Lord. He has still the same great and good thoughts of God that ever he had, and is as forward as ever to speak them forth to his praise; he can find in his heart to bless God even when he takes away as well as when he gives. Thus must we sing both of mercy and judgment, Ps. ci. 1. [1.] He blesses God for what was given, though now it was taken away. When our comforts are removed from us we must thank God that ever we had them and had them so much longer than we deserved. Nay, [2.] He adores God even in taking away, and gives him honour by a willing submission; nay, he gives him thanks for good designed him by his afflictions, for gracious supports under his afflictions, and the believing hopes he had of a happy issue at last.\(^58\)

When we experience suffering, do we acknowledge that we are unworthy and unprofitable servants that apart from Christ do not really deserve any good from God at all? Do we praise God for all the good things He has given us? Do we thankfully acknowledge that God has the right to take away as well as to give? Do we look to the joy beyond the storm and understand that no matter what we are going through, God in His providential dealing with us has our own best interest in mind? Beloved, suffering is never easy and there is nothing wrong with shedding tears. But let us always respond to suffering like our Savior. Let us look beyond our own tears to the bloody cross and thank God that nothing can “separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).

Oh, that God would strengthen our faith to endure suffering like many of the saints and martyrs of old! By way of illustration note how the Scottish divine John Brown speaks of his father’s response to suffering: “We found my father standing before us, erect, his hands clenched in his black hair, his eyes full of misery and amazement, his face white as that of the dead. He

\(^57\) Matthew Henry, Commentay on the Whole Bible, 3:12.
\(^58\) Ibid.
frightened us. He saw this, or else his intense will had mastered his agony, for taking his hands from his head, he said, slowly and gently, ‘Let us give thanks,’ and turned to a little sofa in the room; there lay our mother dead…Then were seen in full action his keen, passionate nature, his sense of mental pain, and his supreme will, instant and unsparing, making himself and his terrified household give thanks in the midst of such a desolation—and for it.”

59 Note also how the godly father of Richard Cameron (leader and martyr of the strict Presbyterian Covenanters during the killing times in Scotland) handled great sorrow. James King Hewison writes, “The next act of brutality was the conveyance of the head and hands of Cameron into the cell where his old father still lay for unrepented conventicling [i.e. having unauthorized religious meetings contrary to the prelatical establishment]. The devout Covenanter tenderly lifted them and said: ‘I know them; they are my son’s, my dear son’s: it is the Lord, good is the will of the Lord, who cannot wrong me nor mine, but has made goodness and mercy to follow us all our days.’”

There are really only two approaches in this world to suffering: the biblical approach of trust, submission and worship or the unregenerate approach of either complaining against God or denial. The Israelites in the desert were continually complaining and accusing God of bringing hardship and disaster their way (cf. Ex. 15:24; 16:2; 17:3; Numb 11:1, 4; 14:2; 16:3; 20:3; 21:5). In Numbers 11:1 we observe the covenant people complaining audibly before God. They want the LORD to hear them because they believe their situation (i.e. their hardship) is His fault. The LORD hears; His anger is aroused; and He sends down fire on the outskirts of their camp. Their response to suffering revealed that they really did not trust in Jehovah or understand His nature and character. Instead of blessing God in the midst of trials, they cursed Him. They believed that God was out to get them. They did not trust in Jehovah’s gracious character, a character which as Paul so beautifully states, works all things “together for good to them who love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose” (Rom 8:28). Similarly, Job’s wife did not have the faith of Job. When she heard that her husband was struck with painful boils from head to foot, she said, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die.’” (Job 2:9).

Often we see the outlook of unbelief around us when people are quick to blame God for their problems and suffering. Although there is nothing wrong with acknowledging God’s special providence over the affairs of men and even over the bad things that befall us, it is extremely unchristian to blame God for the evil consequences of secondary causes. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that although God ordains everything that comes to pass, yet He is not the author of sin (3:1). When people blame God for: the horrors of Auschwitz; their wife dying in a car crash; their son dying of cancer; the closing of a factory; or, even the suffering caused by a natural calamity such as a hurricane or tsunami, they are shifting the blame that man deserves for his sin and guilt, both original and actual, to God who is infinitely holy, just and good.

The other pagan approach to suffering comes primarily from eastern philosophy. This outlook essentially denies that suffering exists. Suffering we are told only exists in the realm of illusion (e.g., Hinduism, Mary Baker Eddy, etc). Buddhism acknowledges that suffering exists, but attributes it merely to a subjective state of craving or grasping on the part of man. Therefore, people can completely eliminate suffering through right contemplation which eliminates craving and its consequent suffering. Only biblical Christianity deals with the root cause of suffering: sin

59 From a church bulletin published by Great Commission Publications, Norcross, GA.
and the consequences of the fall. The Lord Jesus Christ dealt with sin, guilt and suffering head on when He suffered and died on the cross.

b) Christ endured suffering by looking to His future victory with the eye of faith. This point is emphasized by the author of Hebrews who tells us to look to “Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:22). Our Lord had the perfect attitude for the endurance of suffering. As the supreme exponent of faith, He did not waver in His suffering because He trusted God’s Word regarding the future joy that awaited Him.

The pagan lives in the present. His attitude is “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32). His future goals in life are all rooted in this world: riches, fame, pleasure, leisure, possessions and so forth. The unbeliever faces suffering with anger and/or despair because his worldview does not really give life any meaning.

The Bible-believing Christian, however, has a completely different perspective. He is willing to deny himself and take up the cross daily because he knows that his life is part of a greater cause beyond himself that lasts into eternity. He knows that beyond the veil of tears lies the face of God; the waiting open arms of the Savior; the paradise of the presence of God. “Thus the apostle Paul could testify that he had suffered the loss of all things which this world counts dear, regarding them as refuse, in order that he might win Christ (Phil. 3:8). This same intensity of purpose was characteristic of the victors of the faith who had competed prior to Christ’s coming. Moses for example,...considered the agonies of the race greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt precisely because he looked away from present sufferings and fixed his attention on him who was the reward, for ‘he endured as seeing him who is invisible’” [Heb. 11:26-27].

While the Mediator suffered He meditated on the promises of God’s Word. “Our Lord believed the promises made to Him: He believed that He was to be ‘exalted, and exulted and made very high’—that He was to ‘see the travail of His soul, and be satisfied’—that ‘his soul should not be left in the separate state, nor His body see corruption’—‘that God would show Him the path of life;’ and, believing this, He ‘did not fail, nor was he discouraged;’—He persevered, amid inconceivable difficulties and sufferings, till He could say, ‘It is finished.’”

If we are to endure suffering, we must “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:9). As Peter says, believers must “rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Pet. 4:13).

Beloved, when you suffer do you follow the example of our Lord? Do you meditate on the precious promises of God? Are you patiently enduring suffering, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of your body (Rom. 8:23)? Paul says, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:16-18). As Christians we must deal with suffering by looking at the past, the sufferings of our Lord and His perfect redemption achieved; and, we also must look with hope toward the future when our redemption in the broad sense of the term is completed.


“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 Jn. 3:2).

c) Our Lord suffered as an innocent man. It is one thing to endure suffering when we deserve it and quite another to suffer injustice at the hands of evildoers or persecutors. If we are to suffer as Christians, we must suffer as holy people if we want to glorify God. Peter writes, “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evil doer, or as a busy body in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter” (1 Pet. 4:15-16).

“Christians in the apostolic age were not all saints: Paul had to deal with a case of incest at Corinth (1 Cor. v. 1-8), and more than once (e.g., 1 Cor. v. 9-13; vi. 8-11; Eph. iv. 28; v. 3-12) found it useful to warn his correspondents against contact with, or relapse into, immoral behavior.” Peter speaks of such professing Christians who were guilty of scandalous behavior. “There is very little comfort in sufferings when we bring them upon ourselves by our own sin and folly. It is not the suffering, but the cause, that makes the martyr.”

One of the reasons that the church spread so widely throughout the Roman Empire was the calm, resolute and brave manner in which believers suffered abuse, torture and death at the hands of the Roman state. When the masses saw Christians suffering unjustly, many people wanted to know about the faith of these martyrs. As secular humanistic states pass more and more laws that are explicitly antithetical to biblical Christianity (e.g., pro-sodomite and anti-family legislation), we may be called to suffer innocently in imitation of Christ.

Jesus’ Response to Suffering

Although we have already considered some details about how our Savior responded to suffering in our examination of Christ as the perfect model of suffering, we need to go back to the gospel accounts to examine the Mediator’s response in more detail. There are two areas regarding His response that we should note for our own edification.

(1) When the blessed Master was about to enter this great struggle, He sought the companionship of Christian friends to watch and pray with Him. During His ministry Jesus would often go to a secluded place to pray and commune with His father. On this occasion He takes the remaining eleven apostles with Him. Near the entrance to the garden, He leaves eight disciples to watch and pray and takes the three closest to Him (Peter, James and John) further into the garden nearer to Him. “They move on into the Garden of Gethsemane, where the Lord, as it were, surrounds Himself with two rings of prayer supporters, as a king in battle might be surrounded by his body-guard.”

In a time of trouble we want someone with us. During extreme anguish we often do not want to be alone. Under such trying circumstances we often do not even want to talk with our companions; we simply want company. Jesus was truly a man like us. He did not want to be alone. “Being human himself, he stood in need not only of food, drink, clothing, shelter, and sleep, but also human fellowship. Cf. Heb. 4:15.” “When Jesus went to Gethsemane there were two things he sorely desired. He wanted human fellowship and he wanted God’s fellowship.”

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64 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 6:1032.
When Christ entered into a severe trial He sought the aid and comfort of His closest friends. This practice should be a lesson to every one of us.

Every one of us is going to go through trials. How are we going to deal with them? Are we going to follow our heathen culture and seek secular humanistic therapy to raise our self-esteem and provide us with Prozac? Are we going to grit our teeth and bear it because we don’t want to appear weak and vulnerable to others? Or, are we willing to follow our Savior’s example and seek the support of solid Christian friends?

Regarding our Lord’s practice of taking along his disciples to watch and pray, there are some important questions to consider.

a) Why did Jesus take Peter, James and John into the garden to be much nearer to Him than the other apostles? Although the text does not speak specifically to this issue, it is not hard to conclude from a study of the gospels that these three were chosen as special witnesses of Christ’s suffering. Among the twelve apostles our Lord chose an inner circle, consisting of Peter, James and John, that was especially close to Him, to which He showed certain events that the other disciples did not directly witness. These three were with the Savior at the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Mk. 5:37; Lk. 8:51), on the mount of transfiguration (Mt. 17:1; Mk. 9:2; Lk 9:28) and here in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:40; Mk. 14:37).

The choice of Peter makes sense in that he played an important role among the apostles and would be the chief apostle to the Jews. Barclay writes, “In the gospel records Peter stands out as the spokesman of the twelve. It was Peter who asked the meaning of a difficult saying (Matt. 15:15; Luke 12:41). It was Peter who asked how often he must forgive (Matt. 18:21), and who inquired what was to be the reward of those who had left all to follow Jesus (Matt. 19:27). It was Peter who asked about the fig tree which had withered away (Mark 11:21) and about the meaning of the things which Jesus had said about the approaching end (Mark 13:3). It was to Peter the Jews came to ask if Jesus paid his taxes (Matt. 17:24). It was Peter who answered when Jesus asked who had touched him in the crowd (Luke 8:45). It was Peter who asked questions of the risen Christ (John 21:20-22).” Note also that Peter was the first person in history to publicly profess that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God (Mt. 16:16). Thus, it is fitting for him to be among the first disciples to witness the depths of the Savior’s vicarious suffering.

The apostle John was a business partner with Peter in the fishing trade (Lk. 5:10) and a close personal friend of Peter in life and as an apostle. “We find John going to Peter’s house after the Sabbath service in Capernaum (Mark 1:29); and in the last days we find Peter and John being sent out together to prepare the Passover feast for Jesus and the other disciples (Luke 22:8).... In Acts in the early days of the church, Peter and John were always acting together, and Peter was almost always the spokesperson for the two.” In the fourth gospel John is repeatedly called the disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn. 13:23; 19:26; 21:7; 20:7). At the last supper we find John reclining at the right hand of Christ with his head resting on the Lord’s chest (Jn. 13:25). Given John’s very close relationship to Peter and his special designation as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” we can understand his inclusion in this inner circle.

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68 “proelthôn micron” suggests that he remained within earshot, so that Peter, James and John, unlike the other disciples, were witnesses to the prayer, though how much they saw and heard before they fell asleep can only be guessed. The fact that the contents of the prayer found their way into Christian tradition may suggest that they did not go to sleep immediately, though it is also possible that Jesus himself talked about the Gethsemane experience in his post-resurrection meetings with his disciples.” (R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 583).


70 Ibid. 31-32.
The other witness to our Lord’s suffering in Gethsemane was John’s older brother James. “That he occupied a leading place among the apostles is beyond doubt. He was the first of them to gain the martyr’s crown (Acts 12:2). In every list of the apostles he is in the first three.”

These three apostles had the privilege of being special historical eyewitnesses of Christ’s anguish in the garden. The apostle John alludes to the important apostolic role as witnesses to the redemptive work of our Lord in 1 John 1:1-3, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life manifested, and we have seen and bear witness, and declare to you, that you may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

Another reason that our Lord wants the disciples near Him is to help them prepare for the severe test before them. Before the Savior moves a stone’s throw (i.e. about thirty yards, Lk. 22:41; Matthew and Mark both say “He went a little farther” [Mt. 26:37; Mk. 14:35]) beyond the three disciples, He says, “stay here and watch (Mk. 14:34) with Me” (Mt. 26:38). The word (grêgoreite) translated as “watch” in its primary meaning means to stay awake or not fall sleep. The verb is an imperative in the present tense which could be translated “stay awake,” “be watching,” or “continually watch.” The verb has a second meaning which means “be on guard;” “protect yourself from danger by looking out for its approach at any moment.”

The verb here, grêgoreite, watch ought to have reminded His disciples of the parable of the door-keeper, told them just before (xiii. 34-37). The task of the door-keeper was to watch, and the Lord rounded off the parable by giving this as a general injunction to His disciples.

Later when our Lord finds the disciples sleeping He will say, “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation” (Mt. 26:41; Mk. 14:38). Given the addition of prayer to the second imperative to watch, we should not view the command to watch as merely a command to be on guard in case Judas comes with armed intruders. Although there may be an element of sentry duty to Christ’s command, the main teaching deals with watchfulness regarding temptation. While Jesus wanted company during His severe trial, His main concern is not for Himself but for His weak disciples.

It may be that the eight disciples near the entrance were to keep watch by looking outward so that the Savior would not be interrupted by Judas and the armed thugs who were to arrest Him. The inner circle that was near Christ was to stay alert so they could watch Jesus in His suffering and learn from the Master how to deal with temptation. Interestingly our Lord does not say “pray for Me,” but “pray with me.” The Savior knew that His arrest, trial and crucifixion would coincide with a severe testing for His disciples; that like sheep His friends would be scattered (Mk. 14:27; Mt. 26:31).

As believers who live in a pagan, corrupt culture, we, like the apostles, must look both ways. We must stand upon our watch-tower and carefully watch against temptations and sins so that we are not surprised by them, caught off-guard and overtaken by them. While we watch outwardly against the world, the flesh and the devil we must also always be watching Christ. If we neglect our relationship with Jesus; if we neglect our communion with Him; if we grow cold or lukewarm in our love and dedication toward Him; if we do not cultivate the means of grace, then we can only blame ourselves when temptations overtake us and we fall into sin. Beloved, stay close to the Savior, watch Him, study Him, pray with Him, trust in Him and you will not become the prey of darkness, dejection, discouragement and despair. Spurgeon’s comments on

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71 Ibid, 154.
this text are excellent. He bids us, “Look at Christ. ‘Consider him that endured such contradictions of sinners against himself.’ Watch the Savior, and watch with the Savior. Be familiar with the passion of your Lord. Get right up to the cross. Do not be satisfied with that, but get the cross on your shoulders; get yourself bound to the cross in the spirit of the apostle when he said, ‘I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live’ [Gal. 2:20]… Get into the side of Christ; it is a cleft of rock in which you may hide until the tempest is over-passed. Live in Christ; live near to Christ; and then, let the conflict come, and you will overcome even as he overcame, and rising up from your sweat and from your agony you will go forth to meet even death itself with a calm expression on your brow, saying, ‘My Father, not as I will, but as thou wilt.’” 74 (We will go into more detail regarding our Lord’s commands under the section “The Imperatives of Gethsemane.”)

b) Another question we need to answer is: Were the disciples faithful to our Lord’s injunctions in the garden? Sadly, although the Savior had commanded His disciples to stay awake in order to watch and pray with Him, He returns after a time to find them sleeping: “Then He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, ‘What? Could you not watch with Me one hour?’” (Mt. 26:40). Although Christ addresses Peter, the plural form of the verb indicates He was addressing all three disciples. Interestingly, in Mark’s account Jesus does not call Peter “Cephas,” but rather “Simon,” for Peter was not at this time acting like a rock. That the disciples were very sleepy is understandable, for it was very late at night; not long before they had had a large meal; and they were living under extreme tension. Luke says, “He found them sleeping from sorrow” (22:45). The disciples were suffering from emotional exhaustion.

The rhetorical question addressed to the three disciples is a gentle, yet painful, rebuke to these disciples who had all boasted of being so dedicated to the Master that they were all willing to die for Him (Mt. 26:28-31). “This brave, mighty Peter had promised to die with Jesus and now he cannot even stay awake at his Master’s bidding!” 75 Clearly, the rebuke is not one of anger but of disappointment. “The remarkable thing is that the rebuke of Jesus is so gentle, and that even in his agony and distress Jesus can think of the needs of these sleepers.” 76 That the primary reason our Lord brings these disciples along for their own edification is the amazing fact “that in the midst of an unparalleled agony Jesus twice more came to look after his three vulnerable disciples and to warn them of their danger of failure in the struggle which was about to overwhelm them.” 77 “…That slumber of theirs must have been greatly rebuked by their Savior’s kindness to them…[O]ur Lord came to his disciples three times, and on the third occasion he found them still heavy with sleep, so he sat down beside them, and said to them, ‘sleep on now, and take your rest.’ There he sat, patiently waiting for the traitor’s arrival;—not expecting any help or sympathy from his disciples, but just watching over them as they would not watch with him, praying for them as they would not pray for themselves, and letting them take another nap while he made himself ready to meet Judas and the rabble throng that would so soon surround him.” 78

In this account we see the Savior magnified even in one of His most desperate hours; and, we also see that men can never attain salvation by works. Roman Catholics worship the apostles, especially Peter whom they falsely claim as the first Pope. Romanists even worship supposed relics of the apostles and argue that these men were so righteous that they have an excess of

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76 Ibid.
77 William Lane, The Gospel of Mark, 519.
merit needed to attain eternal life. They argue that we should seek the excess merits from these saints so that we can avoid the tortures of purgatory. Yet, is it not clear that even the greatest of Christians, apart from the imputed righteousness of Christ, is a failure? In our Lord’s supreme time of need, when He was suffering so much that drops of blood fell from His face, the apostles were sleeping. Yes, they were napping while the Savior was bleeding and soon they would all forsake Him and flee (Mk. 14:50; Mt. 26:56). This scene is a beautiful picture of the Savior’s love for His people. It proves that we can only find salvation in Christ who overcame when we failed; who conquered temptation while we were careless and slumbered; who stared death and hell in the face and didn’t flinch while we fled as cowards. In Gethsemane we see so clearly that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. What a great and loving Savior that we serve.

The gospel also shows us that although Jesus sought the companionship of His closest friends, He truly suffered alone. Although our Lord led His three closest friends into the garden, He withdrew from them a stone’s throw. He knew He had to drink the cup of wrath alone. He knew that He was the one and only offering that would be acceptable to God. “At last it came to this, that there was only one observer. The chosen three had fallen asleep, God’s unsleeping eye alone looked down upon him. The Father’s ear alone was attentive to the piteous cries of the Redeemer.”

(2) The Lord responded to this severe anguish by going to God in prayer. There are three things to consider regarding Jesus’ prayer: a) the manner of the prayer; b) the content and object of this prayer; and, c) the Savior’s response to this prayer.

a) When we look at the prayer of Christ in Gethsemane, one of the first things we notice is its intensity. This prayer arose out of fierce struggle. We see this intensity in our Lord’s posture of prayer. A common posture of prayer among the covenant people was to stand (e.g., Gen. 18:22; 1 Sam 1:26; Neh. 9:4-5; Mt. 6:5; Lk. 18:3, 11, 18), often with the hands spread out, lifted toward heaven (e.g., Ex. 9:29; 17:11-12; 1 Kg. 8:22; Neh. 8:6; Ps. 63:4; 134:2; 141:2; Isa. 1:15; Lam. 2:19; Hab. 3:10; Lk. 24:50; 1 Tim 2:8; Ja. 4:8) and at times accompanied by the lifting heavenward of the eyes (e.g., Ps. 25:15; 121:1; 123:1, 2; 141:8; 145:15; Jn. 11:41; 17:1; Mk. 6:41). There are also many examples in Scripture of bowing one’s head (e.g., Gen. 24:48; Ex. 12:27; 2 Chron. 29:30; Lk. 24:5); kneeling (2 Chron. 6:13; Ps. 95:6; Isa. 45:23; Dan. 6:10; Mt. 17:14; Mk. 1:40; Lk. 22:41; Ac. 7:60; 9:40; 2:36; 21:5; Eph. 3:14) and falling down prostrate with one’s face upon the ground (Gen. 17:3; 24:26; Num. 14:5; 16:4, 22, 45; 22:13, 34; Dt. 9:18, 25, 26; Josh. 5:14; Judg. 13:20; Neh. 8:6; Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; 9:8; 11:13; 43:3; 44:4; Dan 8:17; Mt. 26:39; Mk. 7:25; 14:35; Lk. 5:12; Rev. 1:17; 11:16). Kneeling as a posture of prayer signifies humility toward God and a willingness to submit to God’s will. This point is brought out beautifully in Philippians where the Lordship and universal authority of Christ is to be acknowledged by the fact that “every knee should bow...and every tongue...confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:10-11). “In Acts, kneeling is identified as the prayer posture only on occasions where the context suggests that there might be a particular intensity to the prayer.” Falling down with one’s face on the ground is often a visible manifestation of awe on the part of people who have witnessed an amazing supernatural event or have experienced God’s special presence (Mt. 17:6; Lk. 24:5; 1 Cor. 14:25; Rev. 7:11; 11:16). In the text before us, falling down underlines Jesus’ utter dependence on God in a time of

severe distress and temptation. By His posture the Savior accommodated Himself to His present humiliation. In Psalm 22 our Lord is set before us prophetically as a worm writhing in humiliation and agony. “But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised by the people” (v. 6).

We learn from Christ and Scripture that posture in prayer is important, for it helps us abase ourselves before God. Our posture, of course, must reflect the posture of our hearts before God. Muslims, for example, who are full of pride and hatred toward the Son of God, are very fond of their prayer mats and vain prostrations. However, since they reject the divinity of Christ and the message of the cross, they prostrate themselves to demons, to gods of death and destruction.

Note also that our Lord’s prayer was very personal. Throughout Jesus’ ministry He always addressed God in prayer as Father (the only exception is Mk. 15:34 and Matthew 27:46 when the Savior is hanging on the cross forsaken by God because of the curse of the elect’s imputed sin); and, in the Lord’s prayer believers are taught to address God in prayer corporately as “our Father” (Mt. 6:9). In the garden, however, we have the only inscripturated example of the Lord saying “My Father” (Mt. 26:39). Mark, whose main source for what occurred was Peter, even preserves the Aramaic “Abba, Father” at the beginning of Jesus’ prayer (Mk. 14:36). The fact that the disciples were to address God as “our Father” while Christ would pray “My Father,” coupled with the distinction between “My Father” and “your Father” in His discourses, indicates that the use of “Abba” in Mark’s account expresses a special, unique relationship to God. He is the one and only begotten Son, while we are all sons by adoption, by virtue of our union with Him.

Interestingly, in the literature of early Palestinian Judaism, there is no evidence that the Jews addressed God in prayer as “Abba” or as “our Father.” To the Jewish mind at that period of their history, “the use of this familiar household term would have been considered disrespectful in prayer, and therefore inconceivable.”82 The Old Testament, however, does offer precedent for addressing God as Father. The song of Moses says, “Is he not your Father, who bought you?” (Dt. 32:6). Speaking of the Immanuel to come the psalmist wrote: “He shall cry to Me, You are My Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation.” Isaiah 63:16 reads: “You, O Lord, are our Father; our Redeemer from everlasting is Your name” (cf. Isa. 64:7; Jer. 31:9; Mal. 1:9; Ps. 68:6; 27:10; 2 Sam. 7:14, 14). Jesus, then, restores the personal covenantal language of the Old Covenant church to the New Covenant people of God after it had been lost to formalism and human tradition. Christ’s example is followed by the divinely inspired Apostles, such as Paul who says, “But you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God” (Rom. 8:15-16).

b) As we examine the context or object of Christ’s prayer, there are a number of important things to consider.

First, in Mark’s account the prayer begins with a confession of faith or a declaration of full confidence in God’s power and goodness. The Savior says “All things are possible for You” (Mk. 14:36). Jesus is saying: “Father I believe that you have the power and authority to do anything.” By this confession our Lord is not saying that God can do anything, including evil, for the Master knows that God can only act according to His nature and character. Further, he immediately limits this possibility by acknowledging that everything must occur according to God’s decreit will. “It is accordingly, in the spirit of complete confidence and submission that

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he makes his petition.”83 “In Mark ‘All things are possible to Thee’ means ‘All things that thou willest are possible.’”84

Second, from start to finish the prayer of the Savior is conditional; it is always conditioned upon the will of God. Matthew’s account says, “If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” (Mt. 26:39). Luke reads, “If it is Your will, take this cup away from Me” (22:42). All three synoptic gospels conclude this petition with: “nevertheless not My will, but Yours be done” (Lk. 22:42; cf. Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36).

Scholars who see in this prayer a tension between the will of the Son and the will of the Father misunderstand the text. Jesus according to His human nature is asking God if there is any other way besides the bloody cross to remove the guilt and penalty of sin. There is never even a hint that He was having second thoughts or was unwilling even for a moment to obey His Father. “Jesus’ desire was conditioned upon the will of God, and he resolutely refused to set his will in opposition to the will of the Father. Fully conscious that his mission entailed submission to the horror of the holy wrath of God against sin and rebellion, the will of Jesus clasped the transcendentally and sacred will of God.”85

The human nature of Christ wanted to avoid the intense suffering set before him only if it was according to God’s will. Alfred Nevin writes, “The prayer of Christ was, as it were, taken back, before it was entirely uttered. It must be remembered that He who spake these words, having two distinct natures in one person, had a human will as well as Divine. Nevertheless, inasmuch as I have entered into covenant engagements, and have become surety for sinners, inasmuch ‘for this cause came I unto this hour’ and to offer up atoning sacrifice in my death is the great design of all the Divine decrees and operations which have brought me to this point; inasmuch as without this sacrifice, the oracles of ancient prophecy will be falsified, and the redemption of men’s souls, which is precious, cease forever: not my will, not the will of my human nature, but thine—the will of God, (as it is written concerning me,) which I delight to do, let that be done, (Ps. xi 7, 8,) at whatever expense of agony.”86 Once the weak and finite human nature of Jesus understands, the matter is settled and cannot be altered; He embraces it.

The only way that we can begin to understand our Lord’s petition is to examine the great and mysterious truth that our Lord had two wills, a human and a divine will. As God, the Savior obviously had a will in complete harmony with the Father. But, as a man who was finite and limited in knowledge and understanding, Jesus needed reassurance that the road to Golgotha was the only way to secure man’s redemption. His prayer indicates human anguish and weakness. It does not indicate any desire to contradict God’s will, for it always presupposes absolute surrender to the Father’s will.

We see in this amazing portion of Scripture not only incontrovertible evidence of the hypostatic union of the two natures (divine and human) in Christ, but also absolute proof that the only way to enter heaven is by faith in the atoning death of Jesus. Once God of His own good pleasure decided to save a people for Himself, the only way to save them was by the suffering and death of His only begotten Son.

Third, we are told that the Savior made virtually the same request to the Father three times. Matthew writes, “So then He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time,

saying the same words” (26:44). What this means is that Christ’s prohibition against vain repetition in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6:7) does not condemn all repetition in prayer, but only repetition that is not honest, sincere, attentive and from the heart. It is very common for people in churches which use prayer books week after week, for people to mumble through the prayers while their minds are drifting from one profane thing to another. Such repetition is “vain repetition.” It is very disrespectful to God to let our minds wander in prayer, as if communicating with Him were not a great privilege, or as if it were something unimportant. “Those who teach that we should pray but once, and not repeat the petition that we present to the Lord, cannot quote our Saviour’s example in support of their theory, for thrice on that dread night he offered the same supplication, and even used the same language. Paul, also, like his Master, ‘besought the Lord thrice’ that the ‘thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan’ might depart from him” 87.

Some of the Puritans, in their zeal to combat the prayer books and vain repetitions of the Anglican Church, went too far in their contentions, even forbidding the reciting of the Lord’s prayer in public worship. While we must always be on guard against the leaven of Romanism, Anglo-Catholicism, James Jordanism and the sacerdotal high-church movement in modern Presbyterianism (the Federal Vision, paedo-communion, the weekly use of prayer books in public worship rather than as aids to worship, the church calendar, etc), we must not overstep the clear teaching of Scripture that repeating the same words from the heart is lawful.

When we are going through a severe trial we must look at the Savior agonizing and praying in the garden. His example shows us that if God does not immediately grant our petitions, we must not be discouraged, grow weary, or give up. The Lord teaches us to prevail in prayer. So, then, it is not a superfluous repetition of the words if unanswered prayer is met with further fervent requests, even if we ask a third or fourth time.

Note the teaching of our Lord on the persistence in prayer from Luke 18:1-8: “Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: ‘There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, “Get justice for me from my adversary.” And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, “Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.”’ Then the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily.’”

c) One thing that we must not neglect as we survey this wondrous scene is our Lord’s response to this struggle. After He knelt and then fell to the ground in agony and repeatedly petitioned His Father with tears and bloody sweat, we see an amazing calmness in the Savior. After this battle, which afflicted His soul until it was near death, Christ stands up, walks over to the disciples, graciously allows them to continue in their slumber, then sits down and waits to be arrested. Only moments before He had repeatedly cried out, “If it is possible let this cup pass from Me.” Yet, now immediately after this scene of prostrate agony and devotion, Jesus is tranquil and calm. He tells the apostles in an ordinary, matter of fact manner, “The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand” (Mk. 14:41b). “Away he goes, so calm and collected that unjust accusations cannot extort a reply from him; and though beset on every hand yet is he led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearsers is dumb, so he opens not his mouth.

That was a magnificent calmness of mind that sealed his lips, and kept him passive before his foes.\textsuperscript{88}

How do we account for this amazing calm after the storm? Jesus achieved this profound peace, this splendid victory because He had faith in God and He was happy to accept God’s will. These two things, of course, are intimately connected. When we pray we must have faith, trust and a full confidence in God. This trust presupposes that we have studied our Bibles and understand who God is. This trust in God (His nature and character and the promises that flow from that character) enables us to place ourselves fully in His hands and accept His will, whatever it is. This faith is the reason that martyrs can walk to the gibbet of execution singing Psalms with joy.

May God enable us to imitate our precious Savior in His prayer, faith and perfect obedience.

Chapter 2: The Imperatives of Gethsemane—Watch and Pray

As we have looked upon our Lord in Gethsemane, one of the striking things that we have seen is our Lord’s love and concern for His disciples. Even as He suffers extreme anguish, three times He goes to His disciples to admonish them to watch and pray with Him. Matthew 26:41 reads, “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” As we examine this text there are a number of things that we need to consider: (1) How do these imperatives apply to the disciples in the immediate context? (2) Why is watching and praying necessary for the Christian? (3) What does it mean to enter into temptation? (4) What are some specific things that Scripture requires us to watch or be on guard for? (5) Why and how is prayer connected to watching and fighting against temptation?

(1) The command to “keep on watching” and “keep on praying” (the imperatives are in the present continuous tense) given to the disciples comes almost immediately before the arrest and trial of Jesus. During this time of bold persecution, the disciples could be placed in situations where they would be strongly tempted to deny the Savior in order to save their own necks. In fact, at the arrest of Jesus “all the disciples forsook Him and fled” (Mt. 26:56) and a little later Peter will deny Christ three times (Mt. 26:69-75). Interestingly, our Lord told the apostles at the last supper only a few hours before, that in accordance with prophecy, “All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I shall strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered’” (Mk. 14:27; Mt. 26:31). Jesus also told Peter of his coming threefold denial (Mk. 14:30, Mt. 26:34). Therefore, we must view these imperatives as warnings to be spiritually on guard and pray for God’s assistance not to betray the Son of God at this crucial hour. Christ’s warning has to do with the temptation to abandon the cause of the kingdom of God, to backslide and move toward apostasy. “Jesus, who had been successfully waging war on the kingdom of Satan (cf. Mark 1:7-8; 3:27, where by inference Jesus is understood as the one stronger than the strong man, Satan), now anticipates a fearful counteroffensive.”\textsuperscript{89} The Savior repeatedly warns His disciples because their behavior indicates that they do not truly understand the great spiritual danger they are about to face. They should be watching and praying instead of sleeping.


What is particularly interesting regarding our Lord’s warning is that it proves the full responsibility of secondary agencies in God’s providential dealings with men. Jesus obviously knew the prophecies about the coming failure of the apostles, for He quotes Zechariah 13:7 at the holy supper. Also, He had just prophesied in amazing detail the fall of Peter. Yet, He does everything He can to lift the apostles out of their spiritual stupor and prepare them for the coming conflict. “He knew what sore temptations were about to assail them, so he would have them doubly armed by—watching unto prayer.”

(2) After our Lord commanded His disciples to watch and pray, he gives a distinct reason why such spiritual exercises are necessary. Christ says, “The Spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak” (Mt. 26:41; Mk. 14:38). By “spirit” Jesus simply means the human spirit, soul or mind of the disciples. The disciples, in their hearts, were willing to do their duty. They wanted to watch and pray with the Savior and they even expressed a willingness to die with Him if necessary (Mt. 26:35; Mk. 14:31). Thus, in this explanation of the disciples’ failure to watch, Christ “gives them the praise of willingness, in order that their weakness may not throw them into despair, and yet urges them to prayer, because they are not sufficiently endued with the power of the Spirit.”

Our Lord corrects these erring disciples graciously and gently as a loving father does his own children. This admonition should not be viewed as an excuse for failure but rather as a reason for diligence.

The term “flesh” (sarx) in this context is viewed by most commentators as not simply the fleshly part of man but as the whole nature of man weakened by the fall. “Flesh,’ as here meant is the human nature considered from the aspect of its frailty and needs, both physical and psychical.”

So, Jesus’ warning includes the disciples’ physical weakness, mental exhaustion and emotional strain that caused them to fall asleep. Interestingly, the term flesh in Scripture is often used to describe the frailty and weakness of men and animals in contrast to God, who is all powerful and unchanging (e.g., “Now the Egyptians are men, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit,” Isa. 31:3; “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength,” Jer. 17:5; cf. Isa. 40:5-6; Jer. 25:31; Zech. 2:13). The question that naturally arises regarding the term “flesh” (sarx) is: does this term in this context merely refer to human weakness as a result of the fall in a non-moral sense; or, does it also have the meaning we so often find in Paul’s epistles where the term “flesh” (sarx) refers to the sinful pollution or corruption of human nature as a result of the fall? According to Paul “flesh” is the seat of sinful lusts which wage war against the Spirit. The apostle warns believers in Romans 7 about “the sin that dwells in us” (v. 17), “the flesh” (v. 18) or “lusts” (vs. 7-8), “the law of sin in our members” (v. 23). He says that our corrupt nature—our sinful inclinations—draws us toward what is evil and “wars against the law of our minds” (v. 23). Paul even discusses this struggle in his own life: “For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me” (vs. 15-17; cf. Gal. 5:17).

Almost all commentators believe that Christ’s phrase “the flesh is weak” (Mt. 26:41; Mk. 14:38) refers not to moral depravity but rather simply to weakness related to fatigue. In favor of this interpretation, they note that Jesus contrasts not the sinful flesh against the Holy Spirit as

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93 See Craig Evans, *Mark*, 415.
does Paul, but the human spirit’s determination to do the right thing which (in the immediate context) is impeded by falling asleep.

However, even if physical and mental weakness which leads to sleep is the only culprit our Lord had in mind in this particular admonition, we must not forget that, by way of application, it certainly applies to the term “flesh” in the Pauline sense. We can say this for the following reasons: a) The disciples are commanded to watch and pray against temptation. The threat they face is a failure to endure in a time of trial. Therefore, just as the command to stay alert and watch has clear spiritual connotations (i.e. they are to be not just physically but also spiritually alert), the weakness of the flesh that leads to slumber does also. Indeed, sleeping becomes a metaphor in the New Testament for giving in to the sinful flesh and leading a wicked lifestyle (e.g., “Therefore, let us not sleep as others do, but let us watch and be sober” [1 Th. 5:6-7; cf. Eph. 5:14]).

b) The greatest impediment to our own spiritual faithfulness is not the desire for physical sleep, but our fleshly natures. Because of the remaining effects of the fall upon us, spiritual exercises are often laborious and difficult. Our spirits are willing but we continually find ourselves swimming upstream against our own carnal desires. The unregenerate man experiences no struggle because he happily follows his own fallen inclinations. He gladly swims down the stream of his own lusts.

Paul warns us regarding this conflict in Galatians 5:17, “For the flesh lusts [or sets its desires] against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.” The reason that we must watch and pray is that our lives are like a violent war. The reason that watching and praying is so important and necessary to the Christian life is because we are in a continual, life-long struggle with the flesh, the body of sin, or the old man, which represents all the corrupt principles, propensities, lusts and passions of our fallen nature.

(3) Jesus instructs the disciples to watch and pray, lest they enter into temptation. What does it mean to enter into temptation? In order to answer this question properly we need to consider: a) the meaning of the Greek word for temptation; b) what entering into temptation does not mean; c) biblical expressions that describe entering temptation; and, d) the meaning of the expression in the context of our Lord’s injunctions.

a) The Greek word for temptation (noun—peirasmos, or the verb peirazein) can have two different, yet related meanings. When the word is used to describe God’s activity towards His people, it refers to a testing or proving and not a tempting or seducing toward sin. James says, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God;’ for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone” (1:13). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 8:2 and 16 use the same Greek word to describe Israel’s period of testing in the wilderness. Moses’ covenant renewal preaching in Deuteronomy chapters 1 through 11 presents the wilderness wanderings as a time of testing to prepare the covenant people for nationhood in Canaan. Testing by God must always be viewed by believers as something positive. Jehovah sends us trials or tests to mature us, to cause us to grow in sanctification. In Genesis 22 God tested Abraham in order to show the genuineness of his faith and help bring it toward perfection (22:1-18; cf. Jas. 2:21-23).

The word peirasmos, in its purely negative sense, refers to a direct and actual solicitation to do evil. Temptation by Satan or a pagan would entail a direct request, prodding, urging or arguing to commit a sin or sins against God. This is what the devil did with Eve in the garden and Christ in the desert. “Temptation can refer to anything—whether a person, a thing, or place,
state, way or condition—that upon any account whatsoever, has a force or efficacy to seduce, to
draw the mind and heart of a Christian from the obedience God requires of him, into any degree
of sin."94

The reason that God cannot tempt or entice a person to sin is that it would be contrary to
God’s nature, which is infinitely holy, just and good. Although God does not tempt us to sin, this
reality does not mean that God does not sovereignly lead us into conflicts with evil that we
would consider temptations. “Our God and Father may, for wise ends, which shall ultimately
subserve his own glory and our profit, lead us into positions where Satan, the world, and the
flesh may tempt us.”95 However, “God in no sense leads men into temptation as to have any
share in the blame of their sin if they fall into it…. The devil tempts men that he may ruin them;
God tries men and puts them where Satan may try them, but he leads them into temptation for
probation, that the chaff may be sifted from the wheat, that the dross may be separated from the
fine gold.”96

Some may argue that the terms trial, or test as opposed to temptation are words without a
real distinction. While these words are obviously closely related, it is important that we uphold
the distinction that Scripture makes between God testing a person and the devil tempting
someone. This distinction upholds God’s nature and character, preserves His absolute
sovereignty and explains how we can pray “lead us not into temptation” (Mt. 6:9). The Pelagian
or crass Arminian who argues that God has no control over evil actions whatsoever, if consistent,
could not even pray the Lord’s prayer. God is sovereign over all affairs, even bad things that
happen. However, God does not directly tempt anyone to sin, nor is He in any way responsible
for evil.

b) In order to better understand the expression “enter into temptation,” it will be helpful
to first identify what it does not mean. It does not refer to the common everyday temptations that
accompany our lives. “Temptation in general is comprehensive of our whole warfare; as our
Lord calls the time of his ministry the time of his ‘temptation,’ Luke xxii 28. We have no
promise that we shall not be tempted at all; nor are we to pray for an absolute freedom from
temptations.”97 If we were not to be tempted at all, we would have to leave this world altogether.
Papists, under the influence of asceticism, attempted to leave off all temptation by entering
monasteries and nunneries. They, of course, soon discovered that temptations accompanied them
behind the stone walls because their hearts and lusts could not be left outside the fortifications.
Therefore, entering into temptation is something more than temptation itself. It is a temptation or
trail so great that it ensnares a believer to the point that he may fall into sin. Also, it does not
mean to be conquered by temptation. “A man may ‘enter into temptation,’ and yet not fall under
temptation.”98 God can make a way for a man to escape or conquer such an enslavement. Jesus
entered into temptation in the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13; Lk. 4:1-13) and again in
Gethsemane, yet He prevailed over it. Therefore, entering into temptation must not be confused
with committing sin.

c) There are a number of biblical expressions that help us understand what it means to
enter temptation. Paul warns Timothy saying, “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation

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95 Charles H. Spurgeon, “Lead Us Not into Temptation” in Expository Encyclopedia (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996),
14:387.
96 Ibid.
97 John Owen, “What is It to Enter into Temptation?” in Works, 6:97.
98 Ibid.
and a snare” (1 Tim. 6:9). The expressions “fall into” (empiptōsin) and “snare” (pagis) are used figuratively to describe circumstances that trap a man in strong temptation. We picture a man walking in the woods who falls into a pit and is trapped in it. He is entangled and does not know how to escape. We find a similar expression in 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man.” The image here is of a man overtaken and held fast by a beast of prey. The apostle Peter tells a persecuted church, “The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations” (2 Pet. 2:9). The image here is that of a man trapped in the mire or locked in a cell. Such a person needs God to deliver him out of such a dire situation.

d) The context of our Lord’s injunctions to the apostles supports our contention that entering into temptation is something much more serious and dangerous than everyday temptations. The imperatives are given to the disciples because they were about to enter into the temptation of persecution. At this time they were especially vulnerable because they would not have the presence of the Savior to uphold, encourage and rebuke them; the Holy Spirit was not yet poured out; and, the disciples were scattered and could not depend on mutual encouragement. Similarly, when Jesus speaks to the church of Philadelphia He promises them: “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of temptation which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Rev. 3:10). The hour of temptation describes a distinct period of time of extreme testing for the saints.

(4) Now that we have some understanding of what it means to enter temptation, let us turn our attention to the means of preventing entering into temptation by our Lord. He tells us to “watch and pray.” These imperatives (biblically defined) comprise the whole duty for a believer’s preservation from temptation. It is our great duty as Christians to be very diligent in these two injunctions, so that we will not fall into temptation. If we are not diligent, we will enter into temptation and entering temptation is the path that can lead to sin, backsliding and even apostasy. Jesus knew the very dangerous nature of falling into temptation, for one of the subjects that He gave us for our daily pleading with God is: “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil” (Mt. 6:13). We are to pray that God would deliver us from the evil that accompanies our entering into temptation. Although these two imperatives are interrelated and interdependent, we will consider each command in turn for the sake of organization and clarity.

Keep on Watching

As we turn our attention to the duty to watch, we need to emphasize from the start that success in this endeavor is dependent on a solid knowledge of the sacred Scriptures. It is God’s word that tells us about our weaknesses, gives us examples of saints and apostates who have failed in this area, and warns us about circumstances in life that lead us into temptation. Therefore, when we stand upon our watchtower, the Bible must be our light and lens to illuminate and focus our hearts upon all that may assail us. Solomon says, “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23). “Keep it with all keepings. Keep it from getting evil, as a garden is kept; keep it from doing evil, as the sea is kept at bay from reclaimed netherlands. Keep it with the keeping of heaven above, and of the earth beneath—God’s keeping bespoken in prayer, and man’s keeping applied in watchful effort. The true principle on which an effectual restraint can be put upon the issues of the heart is indicated in the 21st verse—‘Keep’ my words ‘in the midst of thine heart.’”

Our watching must be applied to a number of different areas.

(1) Watching must involve a continuous, careful and close examination of our own hearts. Many professing Christians enter into temptation because they fail to consider the weakness of their own hearts. We have already briefly considered the corruption of our natures that all Christians must contend with. It is for this reason that Solomon says, “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool” (Prov. 28:26); and, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5). Jeremiah says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (17:9). Our hearts cannot be trusted; therefore, they must be diligently watched. Owen writes, “If a castle or fort be never so strong and well fortified, yet if there be a treacherous party within, that is ready to betray it on every opportunity, there is no preserving it from the enemy. There are traitors in our hearts, ready to take part, to close, and side with every temptation, and to give up all to them; yea, to solicit and bribe temptations to do the work, as traitors incite an enemy.”

We must understand that watching against entering temptation must always occur on two different levels—one inward, the other outward. There are a number of areas that we must carefully watch in our own hearts.

First, we must carefully watch our emotions and attitudes. When Peter was told by Jesus that all the apostles would be scattered like sheep after His arrest, he boldly proclaimed, “Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble” (Mt. 26:33; cf. Mk. 14:29; Lk. 22:33; Jn. 13:37). The apostle had supreme confidence in his heart. Instead of boasting he should have been praying. The Bible says, “When pride comes, then comes shame” (Prov. 11:2); and, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). If we do not watch our hearts and pride comes, we will be ensnared by it. We will find ourselves saying and doing things contrary to Scripture if pride is not identified and removed.

How many young gifted men have entered into temptation and even embraced damnable heresies because of pride? It is pride and love of respectability that causes men to depart from the simple old gospel and embrace the latest human theological fantasy. It is pride that leads men away from the biblical worship of our covenanted forefathers to the latest fad and gimmick. Do you not see the constant need to watch our deceitful hearts?

We must also pay careful attention to our affections. When we become angry, we must carefully watch ourselves so that anger is not given free reign in our hearts. Paul says, “Be angry, and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your wrath” (Eph. 4:26). The apostle’s injunction presupposes that if anger is not dealt with immediately in a biblical manner, then the result will be a severe temptation to commit sin. The person who holds anger inside coddles it, nourishes it and inflames it until it boils over into an unlawful response. Note the wisdom of Solomon on this matter: “He who hates, disguises it with his lips and lays up deceit within himself” (Prov. 26:24). “Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls” (Prov. 25:28).

Second, we must carefully watch against self-deception. People enter into temptation when they lie to themselves regarding their condition, behavior, motives or corruptions. Many people enter into temptation voluntarily by rationalizing away the truth of Scripture and godly counsel. Anyone who has served in the ministry for any length of time has met people who through godly counsel stayed on the straight path, but then, after a time, essentially talked themselves into disobedience. They entered temptation by trusting their own wisdom, counsel and reason instead of Scripture and the biblical advice of elders. Very often it is these types of

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people who totally apostatize from the faith. Because they are not honest with themselves, they rush headlong into temptation and sin all in the name of truth, love, concern and piety.

Note also that it is important for us to see how these areas of watchfulness are interrelated. For example, a man who has a problem with pride is often unwilling to honestly evaluate his own weak areas. Also, pride is very intimately connected to self-deception. It is pride that leads a man to falsely believe he is strong when he is weak. It is pride that convinces a man that he can go into areas where he will be tempted without danger. Pride goes before a fall because it deceives us into thinking we can defeat the enemy in our heart and the allurements of this world while violating the biblical principles relating to inward corruption, temptation and outward allurements. Humility says, “Don’t trust yourself; don’t ever voluntarily place yourself in a situation of temptation; don’t depend on pop psychology, Prozac and humanistic solutions—trust in God and His Word alone.”

Third, we must study ourselves and identify our weak or problem areas. For it is in these areas where a Christian is the most vulnerable to attack and is most likely to fail. Therefore, we must watch and be acquainted with our souls, our temperament, our most common lusts and corruptions, and our spiritual weaknesses. “There is a weakest point in every one of us; and remember, the strength of a rope is to be measured, not according to its strength in its strongest but in its weakest part. Every engineer will tell you that the strength of a ship should always be estimated, not according to her strongest but her weakest part, for if the strain shall come upon her weakest part, and that be broken, no matter how strong the rest may be, the whole ship goeth down.”

The French had their Maginot line to keep out the Germans in 1940, but the Germans attacked through the Ardennes where there were no fortifications, virtually no heavy armor and only small amounts of troops. We all know the result: France was defeated in only six weeks.

Once we identify our weakest areas, then we must carefully watch them while we build up our spiritual fortifications in that area. For example, if a person has a problem with anger and often lashes out against others, he should memorize passages of Scripture about anger and repeatedly practice a biblical response. Some people have an excessive love of material things and have a problem with contentment. These people need to study passages about contentment, staying out of debt and the many spiritual dangers associated with great wealth. Some men are prone to laziness, irresponsibility and self-induced poverty. These men need to study what the Bible says about work, property and providing a good inheritance to one’s godly children and grandchildren. A very common problem with men is the lust of the eyes and temptations relating to sexual matters. Such men must be very vigilant in avoiding images and sights that would stimulate lusts and tempt them to sin. In this sex-saturated culture we must do everything we can to guard the eye-gate and ear-gate.

(2) We must be on guard regarding external causes of temptation. In other words, to the best of our ability, we need to control our environment. This point is very obvious, yet professing Christians violate it all the time. For example, young believers who would loudly proclaim their strong opposition to fornication in our culture often engage in the modern pagan practice of non-chaperoned dating. By doing so they are placing themselves in a situation of temptation. The results of this practice are seen in various polls of evangelicals which place their fornication rates only slightly lower than the heathen.

Guarding against external temptation has a number of different aspects. First, we must watch and be alert against every circumstance that may provoke or stimulate sinful thoughts, words or actions. If you have a prior pattern of drinking alcoholic beverages to excess, then

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obviously you need to avoid bars, taverns, pubs or parties that will tempt you to drink. If you are weak in this area, you should not keep company with people who will tempt you to drink and you certainly should not keep alcoholic beverages in your home.

If you have problems with sexual lust, then you must not visit magazine shops or video stores that sell or rent pornography. This means you don’t even walk inside the door, for the moment you do you have placed yourself into temptation. Further, cable channels that carry lascivious programming must be totally avoided. If you are tempted by internet pornography, then you must either get rid of your computer or put it in a public area of the home and have excellent filters installed so that access to lewd websites is impossible. Internet pornography is a huge problem for many professing Christian men. Remember, don’t trust yourself. Stop ungodly images before you backslide and become ensnared. “A man may not be led where the sparks are flying. If I have a heart like a bombshell, ready to explode at every moment, I may well pray God that I may be kept from the fire, lest my heart destroy me.”

We must imitate Job who made a covenant with his eyes not even to stare at young women. This godly patriarch was scrupulous in avoiding all the occasions of temptation. Job understood that the eyes are often the first instrument of sin. Therefore, he made an agreement with himself to avoid temptation. He planned ahead and made strict rules that even extended to his thought life. He took steps to avoid not just the outward act of adultery, but also the impure imaginations and desires that are the roots of uncleanness.

When Peter described false teachers that plagued the church, he said that they “indulge the flesh in corrupt desires…having eyes full of adultery” (1 Pet. 2:10, 14). In our perverse culture where sexual images permeate the visual media; where many women dress like prostitutes with their tattoos and belly button rings; where sex is used to sell everything from cars, to beer, to shampoo, we must watch by making non-negotiable rules that help us avoid temptation. As Paul says, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:14). We must put on Christ in our everyday life and do everything we can to deprive sin of an opportunity.

Second, we must be on guard against keeping company with anyone who would lead us into temptation. The Bible repeatedly warns us that evil company (i.e. making friends with and “hanging out” with pagans or even hypocritical “Christians”) is a corrupting force on covenant people. Paul says, “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’” (1 Cor. 15:33). Keeping company with evil companions has a corrupting influence on our attitudes and behavior. Interestingly, the apostle’s injunction comes in the middle of an argument against professing Christians who are denying the resurrection from the dead. Even fellowshipping with people who have heretical doctrine can have dire consequences. Therefore, Paul warned the Ephesian elders to watch out for false teachers. “From among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” (Ac. 20:30-31).

In Second Corinthians Paul argues that separating ourselves from evil involves separating ourselves from the heathen and their influences. “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?” (6:4; cf. Lev. 19:19; 22:10). The apostle is not saying that we should enter a monastery or avoid all interaction with the heathen, but that we should not make them yokefellows, companions or close friends. If we want to avoid entering into temptation we must not form a business partnership with the heathen; join clubs or associations with them; join with

102 Ibid.
them in a pragmatic manner to fight against abortion (e.g., Romanists, Unitarians, Mormons); and, we must not attend heretical churches (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Arminian, dispensational, etc.). To do so is to deliberately place oneself in harm’s way, spiritually. As Solomon says, “Do not be envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them; for their heart devises violence, and their lips talk of trouble-making” (Prov. 24:1-2). “He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; therefore, do not associate with one who flatters with his lips” (Prov. 20:19).

Psalm 1 tells us how companionship with the wicked can lead to three degrees of departure from God. “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night” (vs. 1-2). Note that the person is corrupted by accepting the advice of unbelievers. Then, the rebellion progresses as that person now leads a lifestyle in accord with the heathen. Then, finally, they become the most obstinate and scandalous of sinners; they are scoffers. They end up mocking the truth and the way of righteousness. They trample the cross under foot as apostates. How many Christian parents have put their own children into temptation by putting them in a state school or secular university? The rate of apostasy for the children of evangelicals in America is shocking. We must watch against temptation if we want to persevere. “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed” (Prov. 13:20).

Third, we must watch for providential conditions beyond our control and prepare our hearts to meet them. There are a number of things in life that are beyond our control that lead us into temptation; things such as calamity, financial catastrophe, disease, persecution, unexpected riches, a spouse who turns out to be an ungodly malcontent, a wicked Christ-hating boss and so on. When Christ commanded the disciples to watch and pray, the immediate context suggests that they were to watch even though the coming events were outside their sphere of influence. That is why watching is frequently linked with prayer. We pray if it is God’s will, that these times of temptation would be removed. But we also pray that if we must endure such trials, we will be given the grace to endure them.

The fact that Jesus told the disciples to watch under their uncontrollable circumstances means that watching also has the sense of being spiritually prepared to deal with all situations that may arise. Paul uses the term in a similar manner in 1 Corinthians: “Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong” (16:13). Here watching is coupled with a steadfast belief in true Christian doctrine. In 1 Thessalonians Paul couples watchfulness with spiritual and ethical sobriety or wakefulness. “We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep as others do, but let us watch and be sober” (5:6). Also, the many parables and passages in Scripture that teach watchfulness or preparedness for the second coming of Christ essentially teach us to be ready by being faithful to the Word of God. Those who are not watching are not doing the work of the Master, but rather are sleeping (Mk. 13:34-37; cf. Mt. 24:42 ff.; 25:13; 1 Th. 5:6; Rev. 3:3; 16:5). Given all these passages, the watching involved for events beyond our control is more offensive than defensive. It obviously involves a saturation of our minds with Scripture and also a habitual practice of obedience to what the Bible requires. Our Lord put it best with his illustration of two builders and two different foundations. He says, “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand, and the rain
descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall” (Mt. 7:24-27). Given all this, there is simply no substitute for reading, studying, memorizing, mediating upon and obeying the holy Scriptures. The main reason that many professing Christians in America wilt and fall under pressure is that they don’t know the Scriptures, Christian doctrine or biblical ethics. Beloved, the storms are coming: Watch and pray!

(3) We must be on guard against the first motions and movement of temptation and sin within us the moment they appear. The longer a believer waits to deal with temptation or lust, the more likely that that believer will fall into sin. “If you fail to deal with it at that stage, it will overcome you. Nip it in the bud, deal with it at once, never let it get even a moment’s foothold. Do not accept it at all. Perhaps you feel inclined to say, ‘Ah well, I am not going to do the thing.’ Ah, but if you accept it in your mind, and begin to fondle it there, and entertain it in your imagination, you are already defeated.”

103 If we play with lusts in our mind, contemplate the pleasures of sin and start debating whether or not to commit the act itself in our spirit, then we have lost the battle. Not only have we begun to sin in our hearts, but we have purposely placed ourselves where the outward act itself is almost inevitable.

Think for a moment about King David. David goes up to his roof to relax and sees a beautiful woman taking a bath (King David had the biggest house in the neighborhood with the best view). Did the king know that it was sinful to watch another man’s wife take a bath? Yes, he certainly did! Did David then go immediately back into his house to avoid this passion-inflaming sight? No. The king stayed on the roof, stared, fantasized and then planned a course for adultery and eventual disaster. The moment he saw Bathsheba, he entered temptation and should have fled for his spiritual life. But, tragically he did not. This failure to deal with the first motions of temptation scarred him the rest of his life.

Let us contrast David’s behavior with that of Joseph. In Genesis 39 we read about the hot pursuit of Joseph by Potiphar’s wife. In verse 9 Joseph empathically tells this wicked woman: “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” Then in verses 11 and 12, we read how she springs her trap and Joseph enters into temptation. Note his response: “Now it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house was inside, that she caught him by his garment, saying. ‘Lie with me.’ But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside.” Unlike David, Joseph was on the alert for the first motion of temptation. He was prepared for battle; he knew what to do immediately. He didn’t even have to think about the matter; he was out the door in a split second.

Another instructive contrast between entertaining temptation and immediately quenching it can be seen in the examples of Eve and Christ. When Eve was tempted by the devil, she debated within herself on the reasonableness of Satan’s word versus God’s Word. She toyed with temptation, took it into her heart and coddled it. The result was sin and the fall of mankind. Jesus, on the other hand, was alert to the danger of temptation. He was prepared for it and abruptly conquered it. Whenever Satan tempted Christ by challenging Scripture, the Savior always immediately responded with an emphatic, “It is written” (Mt. 4:4, 7, 10; Lk. 4:4, 8, 12) and finally, “Get thee hence” (Mt. 4:10).

Why is stopping temptation the moment it appears so important? Because even though at one time or another all men will be affected by strong temptation, the giving in to temptation always begins in the mind. The mind is always the first battlefield in our confrontation with sin. Therefore, we must be aware of this fact and prepare our defenses ahead of time. We must not be

103 Martin Lloyd-Jones, Romans: Exposition of Chapter 8:5-17 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 146.
caught off guard as if God has not warned us repeatedly of this matter. Remember, Satan and the forbidden fruit did not force Eve to commit sin. She dialogued with her tempter, rationalized her lust, contemplated the benefits of sin, made excuses for it and consented to it in her mind before she ate the fruit.

Further, giving in to temptation and committing sin can have disastrous spiritual consequences that we do not yet comprehend. Some historians say that the careless use of a lamp near a cow led to the destruction of most of Chicago. Entering temptation and giving in to what may be considered a small sin often becomes the spark that starts a great conflagration in the life of that person. David’s pornographic sight-seeing led to adultery, murder, the death of a child and a family history of rebellion and heartache. An angry word or two spoken in haste has led to murder, wars and the downfall of empires. Plumer writes, “Till we see the end of a thing, we cannot tell whether it is to be great or small in its effects…. Our greatest rivers have their rise in little springs whose streams are often buried under leaves and shrubs. The causes now at work in forming men’s character seem contemptible to many. But a leak though not larger than a rye straw, will sooner or later sink a ship. The smallest opening made by a mole in the bank of a canal will of itself grow to a waste of all its waters. One weak link in a chain cable causes the vessel to drift on the rocks…. A scratch has brought inflammation that ended in death. A glance of the eye has led to crimes that will not be forgotten while eternity endures.”

The importance of stopping the first movements of temptation and sin the moment they appear cannot be overemphasized. We must deal with temptation and sin the moment they land on the shore of our hearts before they have time to bring in reinforcements. The longer we wait, the stronger our enemy will become.

(4) We must watch against lukewarmness in our hearts toward our spiritual walk with Christ. The strength of Christians (which is observed in the actions of the principle of grace and holiness in believers) is subject unto various kinds of decay. This sad reality can be seen in Jesus’ admonition to Sardis: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you” (Rev. 3:2-3). “Sardis was built on a mountain, and an acropolis was constructed on a spur of this mountain, which was all but impregnable. Yet twice in the city’s history it had been taken unawares and captured by enemies. The parallel with the church’s lack of vigilance and its need to wake up lest it fall under judgment is striking.”

Watchfulness, then, refers not merely to alertness to the dangers of inward lusts and outward circumstances of temptation but also to our spiritual state itself. If we do not strengthen our spiritual state and remember the blessed gospel and the means of grace, we, like Sardis, will be conquered. Watchfulness against entering temptation involves a daily assessment of our own spiritual growth and strength.

What are we to do when we detect that our love, fervor and diligence toward Christ and His cause is not what it once was? We must cultivate all the means of grace, especially prayer. There is a reason that watchfulness and prayer are companions. In times of weakness, temptation and backsliding, we must renew our strength. As Isaiah says, “He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength…. Those who wait on the LORD shall renew

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their strength; they shall mount with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint” (40:29, 31). God will take us from the depth of our weaknesses, our grief and difficulties and cause us to soar on high.

In our study of watchfulness, we have learned that spiritual alertness first involves being on guard against entering temptation itself. If we are to fear and avoid sin, we must begin with the door to sin which is temptation. We must do everything in our power to avoid it, prepare for it and anticipate it. This involves a careful, continuous examination of our own hearts, weaknesses, environment and every occasion that may lead us into temptation. We must be on guard against the first motions of temptation as well. We need to stop the enemy on the beaches before he can break out and build up his forces. This involves a thorough knowledge of Scripture and anticipating various circumstances of temptation.

Beloved, watch, that you do not grieve the Spirit of God. Watch, so that you will persevere in holiness. Watch, so that you would not bring reproach upon the name of Christ. Watch, so that the church of God would not be put to an open shame. Watch, so that you will adorn the Savior’s gospel and win jewels for the resurrected King’s crown.

Keep on Praying

In our text, watching is only half the equation; the other half is our duty to continually pray. These two must always be together for we can only be protected and preserved by the power of God. There are a number of things to note regarding our prayers for deliverance from temptation.

(1) The prayer for deliverance is a prayer of humility. It is an acknowledgment that there are trials, sufferings and temptations that are beyond our present ability to handle. When we pray for deliverance from temptations, we are acknowledging that we are weak, feeble and untrustworthy while God is sovereign, powerful and faithful. We are to pray, “Save me, O Lord, from such trial and sufferings as may lead me into sin.”

We know from Scripture that Satan and various circumstances in life can go no further in tempting us than God allows. He is sovereign. Thomas Watson writes, “A whole legion of devils could not touch one swine till Christ gave them leave. Satan would have sifted Peter till he sifted out all grace, but Christ would not suffer him. ‘I have prayed for thee,’ &c. Christ binds the devil in a chain, Rev. xxi. If Satan’s power were according to his malice, not one soul should be saved; but he is a chained enemy.”

Therefore, in our prayer for deliverance from temptation we must ask God to remove providential conditions that would lead us into temptation. We see this type of petition in the words of Agur, the son of Jakeh. “Two things I request of you (Deprive me not before I die): Remove falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches—feed me with the food allotted to me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God” (Prov. 30:7-9).

If we are placed in a situation of poverty or even of financial crisis, we may be tempted to compromise biblical ethics by taking an unethical job that uses deception and fraud in its business practices. Many sales jobs are founded upon distortion, exaggeration and blatant deception. We may be tempted to cut corners and give people less than they expect in order to make a living. This is the practice of a number of contractors. And, we may even be tempted to

break the Sabbath. In third world countries where real poverty exists, deprivation often leads to theft, the dealing of drugs and prostitution. Thus we pray, “Lord lead us not into the temptation of poverty.”

Interestingly, Agur also prays against the temptation associated with being rich. I doubt that there are many Christians in this country that pray such a prayer. Yet, there are many temptations that can come with being rich. We all know the debauchery and destruction that very often clings to the rich and famous in Hollywood. Many of us have heard the sad stories of people whose ethical and family lives were turned upside down by winning the lottery. There is a reason that Jesus said, “Assuredly I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt. 19:23-24; cf. Mk. 13:22). Both Scripture and history teach us that prosperity, honor, material things and luxuries often lead to carelessness regarding spiritual things, worldliness, forgetfulness of God, a reliance on our own strength and self-conceit. This common reality, of course, is not true of everyone (e.g., Abraham, Job, Moses, etc); however, it is a recurring theme of Scripture. Our Lord spoke of those who hear the Word, but “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word” and they become unfruitful (Mt. 13:22). “Oh Lord, deliver us from the temptations associated with being rich.”

Biblical prayer is based on a humble acknowledgment that we are saved and sanctified by Christ alone and that we are totally dependent on the efficacy of Jesus’ redemptive work for progress in holiness. Prayer is crucial because keeping and preserving ourselves from sin is not within our own power. We are dependent on our union with the Savior, the intercession of Christ and the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Peter says that Christians “are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:5). We must pray that the Lord will deliver us from every evil work and preserve us for His heavenly kingdom (2 Tim. 4:18). Like David before us we must cry, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Ps. 51:11) and look to Him, “the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). “To call upon God is the chief exercise of faith and hope; and it is in this way that we obtain from God every blessing.”

Calvin writes,

Words fail to explain how necessary prayer is, and in how many ways the exercise of prayer is profitable. Surely, with good reason the Heavenly Father affirms that the only stronghold of safety is in calling upon his name [cf. Joel 2:32]. By so doing we invoke the presence both of his providence, through which he watches over and guards our affairs, and of his power, through which he sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of his goodness, through which he receives us, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace; and in short, it is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us. Hence comes an extraordinary peace and repose to our consciences. For having disclosed to the Lord the necessity that was pressing upon us, we even rest fully in the thought that none of our ill is hid from Him who, we are convinced, has both the will and the power to take the best care of us.

(2) Prayers for divine intervention regarding temptation must be accompanied by faith or a hearty trust in God and His Word. Jesus said, “Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them” (Mk. 11:24). “And whatever things you ask in prayer believing, you will receive” (Mt. 21:22). James concurs, “If

any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord…” (Ja. 1:5-7). The author of Hebrews says, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to Him must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (11:6). Calvin writes, “If we would pray fruitfully, we ought therefore to grasp with both hands this assurance of obtaining what we ask, which the Lord enjoins with his own voice, and all the saints teach by their example. For only that prayer is acceptable to God which is born, if I may so express it, out of such presumption of faith, and is grounded in unshaken assurance of hope.”

Therefore with the psalmist we should say, “When I cry out to You, then my enemies will turn back; this I know, because God is for me…. In God I will put my trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me” (Ps. 56:9, 11)?

God calls us to Himself with the gospel, adopts us into His own family and then tells us to bring all of our cares and concerns to His loving attention. Thus Paul bids us to: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7). Further, on the basis of our Savior’s high priestly work God enjoins us to: “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). Since the command to pray for deliverance from temptation comes from the lips of our loving Savior, we must use the means of grace that He has given; we must believe His promises and we must expect results. We must follow Paul’s injunction to “take up the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one” (Eph. 6:16).

When we speak of faith, we do not mean a faith in faith itself. We mean a belief in and hearty trust in God and His infallible Word. When we pray for relief from temptation we must trust in God’s loving, trustworthy, righteous character. God is faithful. Jehovah is a covenant-keeping God—He is not like us. God himself forced wicked Balaam to say, “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent” (Num. 23:28). Jesus promised us, “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Heb. 13:5; cf. Josh. 1:5). “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand” (Jn. 10:27-28). God is faithful. God is sovereign. Do you believe His promises? Do you treat God as unfaithful by acting as though these promises are not true? God forbid. God has repeatedly and emphatically stated His faithfulness to us so we would trust and lay all our cares before Him. Note Paul’s trust in the faithfulness of God in his prayer for the Thessalonians. “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it” (1 Th. 5:23-24). God hates sin because He is righteous and He has promised to deliver us from evil and present us before His throne as glorified, perfect Christians.

We must also look to God’s Word which has specific promises regarding deliverance from temptation. For example, Paul says, “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13). What a blessed promise! God does not merely provide “a” way of escape in some random fashion, but by divine arrangement “the” way of escape. God’s faithfulness to His people

110 Ibid, 2:865.
is perfect even though our faithfulness to Him is very imperfect. If we are to pray in faith (Rom. 10:14) and faith respects God’s promises (Heb. 4:1; Rom. 4), then we must lay hold of these precious promises and use them in our prayers against temptation.

The use of God’s promises relating to temptation is further strengthened by another promise. John writes, “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him” (1 Jn. 5:14-15). If we are not acquainted with God’s promises because we do not read and commit Scripture to memory and if we neglect to stand on these promises when we pray, then we are guilty of going into battle without the armor that God as so graciously given us. Pink notes that God “requires our concurrence and cooperation—not to assist Him, but for the discharge of our responsibility, and especially for the calling into exercise of those spiritual graces which He has imparted to His children. We must ask if we would receive. And we must ask expectantly, for according to our faith will it be unto us…. In answer to importunate [urgent] prayer God gives of His best to us. David was in sore straits, but he knew where to turn for relief: ‘In the day when I cried thou answerest me, and strengtest me with strength in my soul’ (Ps. 138:3).”

A prayer for the increase of our faith also must include a petition for increased faith in the efficacy of the Savior’s redemptive work regarding our sanctification. Believers are frequently taught about the necessity of faith for justification, but rarely about the relationship of faith to sanctification. When Paul discusses our need for godliness, he always roots our holiness in Jesus’ redemptive work in history. The apostle teaches that, when our Lord died on the cross, we (by virtue of our union with Him) also died to the reigning, enslaving, defiling, power of sin (read Romans 6:1-7:6). Further, when Christ rose from the dead we arose to a new life of holiness (cf. Jn. 17:17; 1 Cor. 1:30-31; 6:11; Eph. 2:1-7; 5:25-27; Tit. 2:13-14; Heb. 13:12; etc). On this basis Paul says, “Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:11; cf. 6:12-14, 18, 22; 7:4, 6).

The apostle says that, as partakers with the Savior, we must maintain a full conviction of who we really are in Him. We must have a living, vibrant faith in this historic, salvific reality and we must constantly live in terms of it. We must keep our eyes focused on Christ in order to present our bodies as living sacrifices unto God. Jesus and His blessed work are the foundation on which our victory over sin rests. A continuous walking in sin is rendered impossible by the bloody cross and the empty tomb. “[T]hat believers are in principle dead to sin and alive to Christ, must become the abiding conviction of their hearts and minds, the take-off point for all their thinking, planning, rejoicing, speaking, doing. They must constantly bear in mind that they are no longer what they used to be. Their lives from day to day must show that they have not forgotten this.”

The volume 1 of our lives is closed; we are now living in volume 2. If we coddle temptations and give in to sin, then we are living inconsistent with reality. We are living as though our death and resurrection had never taken place. Given all this, we must pray and study God’s word to cultivate our faith in Christ. “So the major secret of holy living is in the mind…. We are to recall, to ponder, to grasp, to register these truths until they are so integral to our mindset that a return to the old life is unthinkable.” In our fight against temptation we repeatedly see that biblical prayer can never be severed from knowledge of Scripture or doctrine.

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But what do we do if we find ourselves in a situation of temptation? We must pray and lay hold of the promise that “the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations” (2 Pet. 2:9). Temptation should quicken a spirit of prayer in us. “When Paul had a messenger of Satan to buffet him, he was more earnest in prayer. ‘For this I besought the Lord thrice.’ 2 Cor. xii 8. The thorn in his flesh was a spur in his side to quicker him in prayer. The deer when shot with the dart runs faster to the water so a soul that is shot with the fiery darts of temptation runs the faster to the throne of grace; and is earnest with God, either to take off the tempter, or to stand by him when he is tempted.”

If we are serious about holiness, the temptations and trials that buffet us should bring us closer to Christ and should be providential means of increasing our sanctification. “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

(3) Watchful prayer involves praying for assistance by the Holy Spirit to search our own hearts to find out what is wrong in them. Knowing that our hearts are corrupt and deceitful, we pray for the inward sanctification of our faculties. We need daily supplies of grace to show us the power and deceit of sin within us. If we are guilty of pride and self-deception, we need the special assistance of the Holy Spirit to cause us to see our self-imposed blindness and to set us free from it. Since the battle over temptation always begins in the heart of man, our first defense must be internal purification and illumination. “Hereon David was not satisfied with the confession of his original and all known actual sins, Ps. li 1-5; nor yet with an acknowledgment that ‘none knoweth his own wanderings,’ whence he desireth cleansing from ‘unknown sins,’ Ps. xix. 12; but, moreover, he begs of God to undertake the inward search of his heart, to find out what was amiss or [not] right in him, Ps. cxxxix. 23, 24, as knowing that God principally required ‘truth in the inward parts,’ Ps. li. 6. Such is the carrying on of the work of sanctification in the whole spirit and soul, 1 Th. v. 23.”

(4) Our petitions for assistance in searching our hearts must also be accompanied by prayer for a right spiritual perception and a sound knowledge of the truth. Thus, Paul prayed that our love would be informed and controlled by the truth: “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:9-10). How many people have been overtaken by temptation and sin because they did not understand that biblical love cannot be separated from biblical law and moral discretion? “Love must be instructed if it is to be placed on legitimate objects and restrained from non-permissible ones, if it is to be rightly exercised on all occasions. And the needed instruction can [only] be obtained from God’s word.” This prayer for knowledge and discernment presupposes a careful, diligent study of God’s Word and the daily application of that knowledge and spiritual insight to our lives. If we are to avoid entering temptation and committing sin, we must have godly discrimination. We must be able to discriminate between that which is good and true, bad and false. We must learn what God wants us to loathe and what God wants us to love and embrace.

We must pray that God would help us overcome the darkness and ignorance in our understanding regarding what the Bible teaches and the circumstances of life. Only a God-given wisdom can help us cope with trials and tribulations. We must beg God on our knees to reveal to us the secret workings of the lusts in our minds, to place them under the light of Scripture and

116 Arthur W. Pink, Gleanings from Paul, 203.
defeat them. We must ask God to remove our stubbornness, obstinacy and any aversions in our will to good and spiritual things. We must pray that God would give us a holy hatred of sin so that we would fear the gate of temptation and the sin it leads to. We are to seek God’s grace for the removal of these weights on our souls and the daily renovation of our spirits. “It is the work of the Spirit of God alone to give us a due conviction of, a spiritual insight into, and a sense of the concernment of, these things.”

(5) Our prayers against temptation must involve petitions for an increase in our fear of God for the fear of God is the great preservative against sin. Solomon says, “In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death” (Prov. 14:26-27). “And by the fear of the LORD one departs from evil” (Prov. 16:66). When God increases fear or reverence, awe and love toward Him in our hearts, this fear stands as a granite wall against the fiery darts of temptation. The fear of Jehovah “is a bridle to sin and a spur to holiness. Fear puts a holy awe upon the heart and binds it to its good behavior. By the fear of the Lord men depart from evil. When the Empress Eudoxia threatened to banish Chrysostom, ‘Tell her,’ said he, ‘I fear nothing but sin.’ Fear…stands as a porter at the door of the soul and keeps sin from entering.”

Why do men rush headlong into lusts, temptations and sins? When Paul gives his final verdict regarding fallen man in Romans 3 he tells us, “They have all turned aside…. Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood…. There is no fear of God before their eyes” (vs. 12, 14, 15, 18).

We must not forget that an aspect of the fear of God is our love toward Him. Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (Jn. 14:15; cf. 1 Jn. 5:3). We pray for God to increase our love of Jesus for there is no greater motivation to live a holy life than our adoration and love toward God. When we are buffeted by trials and temptations, our love toward Christ will turn us from temptation. It will conquer sin as we think and live our love by faithfulness, by concrete acts of loyalty. We must love the Savior more than we love sin. Indeed, we must love Him more than our own lives. This godly fear and love of Jesus enables us to replace thoughts of temptation and betrayal with thoughts of the risen Bridegroom. When temptations come, do we want to grieve the Spirit of God? Do we want to betray our precious Lord who sweat drops of blood, was tortured, crucified, separated from the Father and endured the agony of hell for us? This love can turn our hearts from an attitude of carelessness and lukewarmness to fervent dedication where we think: “How dare I even contemplate this sin against my Savior? How dare I think about opening His wounds afresh and bringing shame to His holy name?” Paul says that biblical love “does not seek its own…does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth…endures all things…[and] never fails” (1 Cor. 13:5, 6, 7, 8). The more we love Christ, the more we will hate sin and flee from it. Oh, Lord, increase our love for your dear Son!

(6) When we petition God for deliverance from temptations we must also pray for God to forgive our sins. Whenever Jesus gave us the model prayer in the gospels, He always immediately preceded the petition regarding temptation with “forgive us our sins” (Lk. 11:4) or “forgive us our debts” (Mt. 6:12). According to Scripture what does the confession of our sins to God through Christ presuppose? It proposes a loathing of our sins, a forsaking of our sins and a spirit within us that wants nothing to do with sin whatsoever. “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy” (Prov. 28:13).

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If we are backslidden and serving our own lusts, then the petition to keep us out of temptation is hypocritical. If you are wedded to secret sins and have no intention of an immediate and sincere repentance, then how can you pray “deliver me from temptation” when you purposely enter it every day? “A man might pray to be kept out of the water, but a fish cannot, for it lives in it.” Similarly, if you consciously embrace iniquity, or know what is the right thing to do, yet refuse to do it, then how can you honestly pray, “Lord keep me from entering temptation?” You need to confess your sin, repent of it and ask the Lord to give you the enabling grace to conquer it completely. You need to watch and pray—these two go together. You must watch against sin whether ethical or doctrinal and you must accompany that watching with diligent petitions for assistance. The backslidden believer has abandoned his watchtower. He is leading the life of an antinomian. He needs to pray for repentance and chastising miseries. Then, after he repents, he can ascend the watchtower and pray not to enter into temptation.

If we are serious about our personal sanctification, communion with God, the reputation of the church of Christ, the progression of the Savior’s kingdom and the spiritual state of our families, we must continually pray for God not to lead us into temptation that we cannot bear. We must petition our Father to deliver us from the temptations that we must face. We must be more like James, the brother of our Lord and the author of the epistle that bear his name, who according to the church fathers was nicknamed “Camel-knees.” “James had been so slow of heart to believe that his brother, Jesus, could possibly be the Christ, that, after he was brought to believe, he was never off his knees. And when they came to coffin him, it was like coffining the knees of a camel rather than the knees of a man, so hard, so worn, so stiff were they with prayer, and so unlike any other dead man’s knees they had ever coffined.”

Chapter 3: The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus Christ

And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, “Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast.” And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, “Hail, master;” and kissed him. And Jesus said unto him, “Friend, wherefore art thou come?” Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him. And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest's, and smote off his ear. Then said Jesus unto him, “Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?” In that same hour said Jesus to the multitudes, “Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me. But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled. (Matthew 26:47-56)

120 Alexander White, Lord, Teach Us to Pray (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 68.
Introduction

The betrayal and arrest of Jesus is a turning point in the passion narrative. Thus far, the gospel accounts have focused on the Savior as He interacts with the disciples: His concern for them, His attempt to prepare them for His suffering and their coming trials. The disciples are seen as unprepared, arrogant and irresponsible regarding what is about to happen to them. “From the moment of Judas’ arrival at Gethsemane, the disciples fade out of the picture and before long are physically separated from Jesus for the rest of the story. The only exception is Peter, and his presence will be an embarrassment rather than a help to Jesus. From now on Jesus will be in the company not of his supporters, however unreliable, but of his enemies. And whereas hitherto it has been he who has taken the initiative in all that has been done and said, he becomes now the passive victim, his spoken words are few (though important); and his fate in the hands of others.”

We have come to the point in the gospels where Christ is “betrayed into the hands of sinners” (Mk. 14:41).

As we turn our attention to the betrayal and arrest of our Lord, there are a number of important things to consider. We need to examine the conspiracy to kill Jesus. What are the events that lie behind the betrayal and arrest? Then, we will focus our attention on why the betrayal took place. Why in God’s providence was the Messiah offered up in this particular manner?

The Conspiracy

As we look at the conspiracy to kill Jesus, we need to look at both the Jewish leadership and Judas Iscariot.

(1) In our examination of the Jewish leadership we must discuss the dominant religious party in Israel and on the Sanhedrin—the Pharisees. This point is important because our Lord was arrested and put to death by the Jewish leadership primarily because of religious differences. It was Christ’s view of the law, of salvation and of Himself that caused the unbelieving Jews to intensely hate Him.

a) The Messiah was hated because He strictly held to sola Scriptura (the Bible alone) and emphatically rejected the oral law. A large part of the Sermon on the Mount deals with upholding the Old Testament moral law against the human additions or legalism of the Pharisees. “Jesus repudiates the perverse externalistic interpretations of the Pharisees, their exegetical distortions of the law, and their works-righteousness scheme of justification.”

Christ openly rebuked the Pharisees and Scribes for their false teaching. “He said to them, ‘All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition’” (Mk. 7:9; cf. Mt. 15:3). Our Lord rebuked the Pharisaical perversion of the teaching on divorce (Mt. 5:19). “His teaching on divorce (Mt. 19:3-9) restricts divorce to the one cause of [sexual] immorality rather than allowing a multiplicity of grounds, some of them rather flimsy.” Jesus attacks the misuse of religious vows (corban) which was used by the Pharisees to avoid their biblical responsibilities to their aged parents. The Savior also came into a strong conflict with the Pharisees over the Sabbath. Our Lord upheld the biblical teaching on the Sabbath over against the legalistic

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accretions of His opponents. After Christ healed a man on the Sabbath, the Jews were so angry they wanted to kill Him. “For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him because He had done these things on the Sabbath” (Jn. 5:16).

If Jesus had merely disagreed with the religious leaders of His day over some of the oral law (Halakah), then He would have just started another corrupt Jewish sect and would have fit in with their religious worldview. But, His radical rejection of everything from the mind of man in doctrine, ethics and worship in favor of a strict Biblicism made Him an incredible threat to the whole religious and political structure in Israel. The religious leaders knew that if Jesus were accepted by the people they were finished. The Pharisees were concerned not with the teaching of Scripture, but with maintaining the status quo. They held a religious position which gave them the power in their communities. They were looked up to as teachers, as pious men, as maintainers of religious orthodoxy and they loved their position. “They use their socially accepted role as accurate interpreters of tradition to condemn Jesus according to the laws and customs which give the community its identity and shape.”

b) Jesus was hated because He emphatically rejected the Pharisees’ doctrine of salvation by human merit. The Pharisees had externalized the law and set up a series of external rituals relating to cleanness that they believed resulted in true righteousness before God. But our Lord emphasized the impossibility of keeping the law by focusing on: the requirement for a perfect obedience in the heart of man (Mt. 5:22, 28); the inward corruption of the human heart (Mt. 15:17-20); the necessity of the new birth before a man can see the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3, 5, 7); the requirement of admitting our sin and guilt before God and confessing our sins (Mt. 9:12-13; Lu. 18:10) and the need to believe in Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Jn. 6:47; 8:24; 3:18). As long as the Pharisees depended on their own works and saw themselves as righteous before God they remained in their sins. Our Lord taught that the Pharisees were satisfied with cleaning the outside of the cup while inside they were filthy and corrupt (Mt. 23:27). They were white-washed tombs (Mt. 23:27); who rejected Moses and the prophets (Jn. 5:46; Mt. 23:31); who preached but did not practice (Mt. 23:3).

The Pharisees had set up a false religion based on human effort, pride and external ritual. Our Lord diametrically opposed the Pharisees’ doctrine by teaching that we are sinners (Mt. 19:16); that our works merit nothing (Lk. 17:10); that our only hope of attaining eternal life is to believe in Christ. For this reason our Lord confronted the Pharisees head on with the truth of Scripture. “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24).

c) The Messiah was hated because of His unique claim of divine Sonship. “But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.’ Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God” (Jn. 5:17-18). “Then the Jews said to Him. ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.’ Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple…” (Jn. 8:57-59). “And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one.’ Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, ‘Many good works have I shewed you from my Father; for which of those works

do ye stone me?’ The Jews answered him, saying, ‘For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God.’ Jesus answered them… ‘If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him.’ Therefore they sought again to take him: but he escaped out of their hand” (Jn. 10:28-39).

Although from the gospels it is clear that many of the Jewish people hated Christ and wanted Him dead (e.g., Jn. 7:20), in Scripture the expression “the Jews” often refers to the religious leaders. “Notice how in [John] 8:48 it is ‘the Jews’ who say to Christ ‘Thou art a Samaritan, and hast a demon.’ It was ‘the Jews’ who cast out of the synagogue the man born blind, whose eyes Christ had opened (9:22, 34). It was ‘the Jews’ who took up stones to stone Christ (10:31). It was ‘the officers of the Jews’ who ‘took Jesus, and bound Him’ (18:22). And it was through ‘fear of the Jews’ that Joseph of Arimathea came secretly to Pilate and begged the body of the Savior (19:38)...it was because of the Jews, who sought to kill Him, that Jesus would not walk in Judea, but remained in Galilee.”

If we look at the arrest and execution of the Messiah from the standpoint of secondary causes (i.e. in contrast to the divine decree that lies behind these events), we could make an excellent case that the unbelief of God’s own covenant people, especially the religious leaders, led directly to the arrest and execution of the Messiah. The gospel says that our Lord was born of the virgin Mary. The Pharisees accused Jesus of being born as a result of sexual immorality (Jn. 8:41). The Bible says that the Savior was anointed with the Holy Spirit beyond measure (Mt. 3:16; Mk. 1:10; Lk. 3:22). The Jews taught that He was demon-possessed (Jn. 8:48; cf. Jn. 7:20). The Scriptures say that Christ was born in Bethlehem (Mt. 2:1; Lk. 2:4). The Pharisees first taught that Jesus cannot be a true prophet because He was from Galilee (Jn. 7:41-41) and then in anger they accused the Son of God of being a Samaritan—a heretical half-breed (Jn. 8:48). The gospels teach that Jesus was perfectly sinless, in thought, word and deed (Jn. 8:46; 18:38; Lk. 23:4, 41, 47). But the Pharisees claimed that Jesus was a Sabbath breaker (Jn. 5:18) and a sinner. God’s Word teaches that the Messiah is God’s Son, of the same essence with the Father, equal in power and glory with Him. The Jews claimed that this teaching was blasphemy (Jn. 8:59; 10:28-39). And, it is Jesus’ claim to be God’s only unique Son that was the official reason given by the Jews for His conviction on the charges of blasphemy (Mk. 14:62-65; Mt. 26:64-66). Further, the religious leaders excommunicated from the synagogues anyone who professed faith in Christ (Jn. 9:22). Therefore, the conspiracy to kill the Messiah grew directly out of the bitter soil of unbelief.

Although the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus arrested and taken into custody for quite some time (e.g., Jn. 7:45 reads, “Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, ‘Why have you [the temple guards or police] not brought Him?’”), the decision by the whole council to finally take decisive action occurs soon after the resurrection of Lazarus. “Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him. But some of them went away to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus did. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, ‘What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation’…. Then from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death” (Jn. 11:45-48, 53). “Among the Pharisees as a party the death of Christ had been

long decided on, ch. v. 16, 18, vii. 1, 19, 25, viii. 37; but the council itself only now adopted that resolution, and from this time onward plotted for its accomplishment.”

The council that made the decision to murder the Prince of Life was composed of the “chief priests” (i.e. ex-high priests and members of high priestly families), most of whom were probably Sadducees (the high priest certainly was, see Acts 5:17). The Sadducees were the liberals of their day. They denied the authority of the writings and the prophets; the resurrection from the dead and the life hereafter. The Pharisees on the Sanhedrin were mostly scribes. “The two rival sects hated each other bitterly, yet in this evil work or persecuting the Lord Jesus, they buried their differences, and eagerly joined together in their common crime.” What is particularly shocking regarding their reasoning about why Jesus must die is the pure selfishness involved. The council members were not really concerned about the people or the nation but their own position of privilege: “Observe, however, what it was that they feared (v. 49): not that ‘the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and nation…rather it was that ‘the Romans will come and take away from us both the place and the nation…”

Prior to this plan to have Christ executed, the Jewish leadership, with the Pharisees and scribes taking the lead role, sought to counteract the ministry of Jesus by lying to the people about who He was and what He taught, by excommunicating and persecuting His followers and by attempting to entrap Him in teaching that contradicted Moses or that would place Him in trouble with the Roman state (Mt. 22:21; Mk. 12:16; Lk. 20-24). The problem that the leadership could not deal with was the amazing signs the Savior did. The miracles of our Lord, especially recent events near Jerusalem (the man born blind, Jn. 9; and, the raising of Lazarus, Jn. 11), precipitated the conspiracy to kill the Messiah.

Other factors that influenced the decision of the Jewish leaders were envy toward Jesus and false concepts of a political Messiah. “For he [Pilate] knew that they had handed Him over because of envy” (Mt. 27:18; Mk. 15:10). They despised the Messiah because of His growing popularity with the people, His ability to teach with authority and His ability to perform amazing miracles. The Savior was genuine while they were hypocrites and, deep down, they knew it. Further, like virtually all the Jews at that time, they believed that the claim of being the Messiah involved a political takeover and a revolution against Rome. If Jesus became too popular, their jobs and perhaps even their lives were at stake. Therefore, they reasoned that it was better that this “pretender” die, perhaps even unjustly, than take the chance of a confrontation with the Roman state.

As we look at the events that led up to the arrest of Christ it is important to note that Jesus was in complete control of everything that occurred. Nothing took Him by surprise. As high priest of the order of Melchizedek responsible for the sacrifice of Himself, He orchestrated the events that led to His betrayal, arrest and execution. “Clearly when Jesus came up to Bethany from Jericho, as He did on the preceding Friday, and then raised Lazarus, he precipitated the final decision of the leaders to have him killed. He did so knowingly. When he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he carried the confrontation a step farther. When he cleansed the temple, as the synoptic Gospels record (Matt. 21:12-17; Mk. 1:15-18; Luke 19:45-47; cf. John

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2:13-16 for an earlier incident), he further intensified the leaders’ ire.”

At the Lord’s supper he sent out Judas on His errand of betrayal. And, He sat in the Garden waiting to be arrested.

(2) Although the Jewish leadership was arrayed against Christ throughout His ministry, Judas Iscariot’s role appears only in the last week of our Lord’s life before the crucifixion. The event that sets Judas into motion occurs on the previous Tuesday. It was on this day that Mary anointed the Savior with a very expensive perfumed ointment (“spikenard”). This wonderful act of devotion caused the disciples to be indignant at Mary (Mk. 14:4; Mt. 26:8). Mark tells us “they criticized her sharply” (14:5). Judas Iscariot, the treasurer for the disciples, voiced the strongest objection saying: “this ointment could have been sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” (Jn. 12:5). John’s account tells us that Judas didn’t really care about the poor—he was a thief who was helping himself to the money bag (see Jn. 12:6). Luke says that after Judas became angry with Jesus that Satan entered him (22:3). Satan “is said to enter into the reprobate, when he takes possession of all their senses, overthrows the fear of God, extinguishes the light of reason, and destroys every feeling of shame. This extremity of vengeance God does not execute on any but those already devoted to destruction.”

Then, only one day after the chief priests, the scribes and the elders of the people “plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him” (Mt. 26:4), Judas approached the chief priests and the captains of the temple guard to inquire how he might deliver Jesus to them (Lk. 2:4; Mk. 14:10). The high priests, who were surprised and delighted with this turn of events, promised Judas a reward for his services. When Judas agreed, they weighed out thirty pieces of silver (Mk. 14:11; Mt. 26:15; Lk. 22:5-6). From that time on, Judas “sought opportunity to betray Him to them in the absence of the multitude” (Lk. 22:6; cf. Mk. 14:11; Mt. 26:16).

A few days later at the last Passover meal Jesus informs the disciples that one of the twelve will betray Him. The apostle John leans back and asks the Lord, “Who is it?” (Jn. 13:25). Christ tells John privately, “It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it” (Jn. 13:26). In Matthew’s account Judas asks, “Rabbi, is it I?” (26:25) and receives the answer, “You have said it” (26:25). After our Lord hands the dipped morsel to Judas, “Satan entered him. Then Jesus said to him, ‘What you do, do quickly’” (Jn. 13:27). “So the final gesture of affection precipitates the final surrender of Judas to the power of darkness.” Christ, as the Master of His own destiny, tells Judas to hurry up and set the events for His arrest in motion. “All the details of his Passion, including the time-schedule, were in his own hands, not in the hands of the traitor. In the plan of God it had been decided that the Son of God would make himself an offering for sin by his death on the cross, and that this would happen on Friday, the fifteenth of Nisan. That was not the moment which had been selected by the Sanhedrin or by Judas. Hence, Judas must work faster. And Judas does work faster, probably because he now knew (Mt. 26:25) that he had been ‘discovered.’ He was probably afraid lest the whole plot would fail if he did not act quickly.”

The Purpose of the Betrayal and Arrest in Redemptive History

While the Bible is very clear regarding why the Son of God had to die a sacrificial death, many believers have not considered why our Savior was delivered up in this particular manner.

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131 Newbigin as quoted in, George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 239.
Therefore, we will consider why the betrayal and arrest occurred the way it did. There are a number of areas that we need to consider.

(1) The betrayal and arrest occurred as it did in God’s plan to show that Jesus voluntarily offered Himself up, that He was in control of His own arrest. This point is proven by looking at the various options for the taking of the Savior into custody. If Christ hid from His foes, tried to escape or even allowed His disciples to fight in His defense, then He would have appeared as an unwilling victim as He went to the cross. When Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant, Jesus healed him and told the disciples He could summon twelve legions of angels in an instant (Mt. 26:51-53). “So Jesus said to Peter, ‘Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?’” (Jn. 18:11).

Also, why did our Lord not simply walk to the temple and turn Himself in to the authorities? One reason is that He was not guilty of any sin or crime and thus it would be improper for Him to act as though He were guilty of a crime. Further, it was necessary for the authorities to persecute the Messiah in this manner in order for the covenant nation’s sin to reach its culminating point of infamy before God. If the Savior had turned Himself in, the Jewish leaders would not have been forced to treat their Messiah in such an evil, humiliating manner. Our Lord said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’ Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation” (Mt. 23:29-36).

God, the great owner of the vineyard, had sent many servants to His covenant people, but they (the vinedressers) beat some, stoned and even killed others. “Then last of all he sent His own son to them…. So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him” (Mt. 21:37, 39). The persecution, humiliation and murder of the Prince of Peace were the extreme of wickedness and guilt. God, by these providential events, was filling the cup of wrath of His apostate people. When men abused and murdered the Author of life—the sinless, holy, harmless, loving, Son of God—sin and apostasy reached its climax. The betrayal and arrest of Jesus was necessary as a display of the wickedness, hatred and sinfulness of man, in particular the Jewish authorities and their followers. Apart from God’s grace, men are so wicked, foul, and black that they passionately hate God’s beloved Son. “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19).

(2) The betrayal and arrest were necessary as an aspect of our Lord’s humiliation. In fact, virtually every historical event associated with the betrayal and arrest were sore blows upon the heart of the Savior. He was handed over by treachery, abandoned by His disciples and turned over to the most corrupt group to walk the face of the earth. “There must be nothing consolatory in it; pains must be taken to pour into it all that even Divine wisdom can invent of awful and of unheard woe, and this one point—‘He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against
me,’ [Ps. 41:9] was absolutely necessary to intensify the bitterness.”

There are a number of things to note regarding the humiliation of our Lord in these events.

a) He was betrayed by “one of the twelve” (Mk. 14:43; Mt. 26:47; Lk. 22:47). The phrase “one of the twelve” reveals the tragedy of this event. “The horror of this act from the perspective of Jesus’ movement lay in the fact that the Twelve represented a repentant and restored Israel, the foundation for a new beginning. Jesus had appointed the twelve, entrusted his message of the kingdom to them, empowered them to do his work of healing and exorcism (3:13-19; 6:7-13), and promised them positions of authority in the coming kingdom (by inference in 10:40-45; explicitly in Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30). Judas’ betrayal constituted much more than simply the perfidy [faithlessness or treachery] of one who had previously professed loyalty and commitment to the cause.”

Judas betrayed the Son of God, the covenant God of Israel and the Head of a new redeemed humanity. Judas betrayed not only Christ as his teacher, friend, companion and Lord, but also everything that Jesus stood for. Since Judas was “one of the twelve,” “it would be impossible to mention all the privileges that had been bestowed upon him during the many days, weeks, and months he had spent in Christ’s immediate company.”

Because Judas was “one of the twelve” or part of this very small select group, the people of Israel would have looked upon him as not just a partner but almost as a son to our Lord. The ancient Rabbi-disciple relationship was more like a family than the social connection between teachers and students today. For over three years Judas ate with the Savior, lodged with Him, listened to every inspired Word, watched the Master’s amazing love and compassion and beheld one astounding miracle after another. Because of his unique position and relationship to the Mediator, Judas’ name was associated with that of Jesus. When he betrayed the Lord, the angels in heaven must have gasped while tongues on earth wagged. What treachery! Only a man completely given over to Satan could do such a thing.

Judas was not only an apostle, but was also treated with the utmost confidence as the treasurer of the disciples. This proves that he had the full trust of the other apostles. He had been thoroughly trusted as the keeper of the money bag. There is never even a hint in any of the gospel accounts that his character had been questioned. At the holy supper, when our Lord revealed that one of the twelve was a traitor, no one suspected Judas. They were wondering about themselves. They asked, “Lord, is it I?” Outwardly, until this time Judas appeared above reproach. As one of the twelve, he was probably admired by believers throughout Judea. Yet, inwardly he was a wolf ready to strike at the good Shepherd. For over three years, all the tithes that were collected were given to Judas who, at the direction of Jesus, would have bought supplies and helped the poor. Think of the scandal to Christ’s cause to find the purse-bearer of the Master to be no better than a thief and a traitor. The infamy of Judas’ sin and the humiliation of the Savior were increased by the traitor’s important position. The sinless Son of God’s treasurer was a man-devil, a follower of Satan. To be chosen to such a high position and then to become a conspirator with the corrupt, wicked high priests and Pharisees was treason to the utmost degree.

Judas ought to be a warning to every one of us regarding the dangers of self-deception, secret cherished sins and hypocrisy. Judas was an ordained minister of the gospel. As Peter said of him, “he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry” (Ac. 1:17). He was even

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134 Craig A. Evans, Mark 8:27-16:20, 422.
sent out to cast out demons and heal the sick. For a time he had a position of great honor in the church. Yet, through all this he was never a true child of God. He was never regenerated; he never received the Holy Spirit and never had true saving faith. We know that, as treasurer, Judas was secretly stealing from the tithe box. Judas had an unrepentant heart. How did he justify his sin? How did he reconcile his behavior with his profession? How did he deceive himself for so long? Perhaps he took comfort in his position as a church officer. Perhaps he ignored his sin because he was doing so many good works for the Master.

Oh, dear Christian, examine yourself to see if you are harboring a spirit of Judas in your heart. Remember, there are many ministers, elders and deacons in the pit of hell. There will be multitudes of professing Christians who will be in a state of total shock on the day of judgment. Beloved, don’t make excuses for secret sins, but rather forsake them at once. Don’t convince yourself that you are faithful when you know deep down that you are not. Don’t depend on your reputation or your outward good deeds, when you know you are living obstinately in sin. Also, we must not make excuses for our spouses, our children and our friends when we see hypocrisy in their lives. To ignore their hypocrisy is to help them slide into the lake of fire. Judas was a member of the visible church who was well known and respected throughout Judea by the disciples, yet he was rotten to the core. No one but Jesus, who according to His divine nature was omniscient, had even a clue of his black heart. Given all this, we must be extra diligent in self-examination. We must be honest with ourselves and pray that God would open our eyes to any hypocrisy. The disciples saw in Judas a pious saint, when all the while he was a devilish, foul apostate.

b) Christ was betrayed with a kiss. When Judas plotted with the authorities to betray the Messiah he came up with the signal for identifying Jesus. “Judas is the author of this ‘signal.’ A devilish refinement distinguishes it.” Although it was a full moon that night, the authorities wanted to make sure they got the right man. Judas wanted to make sure he made good on his wicked agreement. Since it was customary at that time for a disciple to greet his Rabbi with a kiss, this method was chosen probably because it would identify Christ without arousing any suspicion.

What is particularly treacherous about the use of a kiss to betray the Lord is that a kiss is a symbol of loyalty, friendship and affection. What should have been a badge of faithfulness became a sign of treachery. What is particularly sickening about this black deed is that Judas embraced and kissed the Savior in a very friendly manner. The verb for kiss (Gk. kataphilein) is an intensive form of the verb philein indicating a fond, affectionate kiss. It was a kiss of mockery, impertinence and hatred disguised as an act of love and friendship. The symbol for love, communion, loyalty, friendship and family was turned into an instrument of hatred, disloyalty, destruction and death. “For a Rabbi’s disciple to kiss his master (on hand or foot) was not an everyday greeting, but a mark of special honour. Nor dare the disciple take this initiative uninvited; to do so was a ‘studied insult’ (AB, p. 329). The greeting of Jesus as Rabbi in this context is therefore heavily ironical (see on v. 25, the only other use of this address in Matthew, again by Judas). Judas’ action thus not only identifies Jesus to the arresting party, but marks his own public repudiation of Jesus’ authority.”

Submitting to this great indignity and humiliation, our Lord retained His composure and responded: “Friend, why have you come” (Mt. 26:50)? That Christ knew the great treachery of Judas’ deed is relayed in Luke’s account where our Lord says, “Judas, are you betraying the Son

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of Man with a kiss?” (22:48). The first word the Savior spoke to Judas was “friend.” What a gentle and kind response to such treason. Our Lord’s words in response to the kiss flowed from a pierced heart. They are a reproof of great disappointment and sadness. Would not the term friend remind Judas of the years of friendship and fellowship they had together? Were they not table companions only hours earlier? “Must the Son of man be betrayed by one of His own disciples, as if He had been a hard Master, or deserved ill at their hands? Must the badge of friendship be the instrument of treachery?” To betray, is bad enough; to betray the Son of man is worse; to betray Him with a kiss, is worst of all.”138 “Betrayest thou,” my Judas, my treasurer, ‘betrayest thou the Son of Man,’ thy suffering, sorrowing friend, whom thou hast seen naked and poor, and without a place whereon to lay his head. Betrayest thou the Son of Man—and dost thou prostitute the fondest of all endearing signs—a kiss—that which should be a symbol of loyalty to the King, shall it be a badge of thy treachery?”139

That Judas did not immediately fall to his knees before Jesus and beg for forgiveness with tears demonstrates that his heart was like stone. His black granite heart had been fully given over to the prince of darkness. Even though our Lord knew that Judas was fulfilling the divine decree; that the events that were occurring had to take place; and, that Judas would never repent, but would go out and hang himself, He still warned Judas and treated Him with a kindness he did not deserve. May God enable us to imitate the Savior in this, so that we would learn to heap coals of fire on the heads of our enemies!

When Judas betrayed the Lord with a kiss, he became the exemplar of all apostates. Is it not true that most apostates in history betray Jesus with a kiss? They begin their treatises of theological poison with declarations of love and honor for the King. They proclaim their loyalty to the Savior and then bitterly attack everything He stood for. From the followers of Arius to the heretics of today, they almost always begin their books with a smooth, humble appeal to their faithfulness to Jesus. “Yes,” they say, “we bring you a new paradigm in theology that is more faithful to God’s Son and His glorious gospel.” They seem so pious and devout in their love of Christ, yet inwardly they are ravenous wolves with hatred in their hearts for the truth. They betray the Son of Man with a kiss. They praise the Savior with their lips but their hearts are in tune with the devil and his lieutenants.

They kiss the Son outwardly and then drive out sola Scriptura, biblical worship and the true gospel from their churches with hatred, whips, the rack, the boot, steel and flame. Every apostate is a Judas. Like Judas, they have sold out the Savior to his enemies. Spurgeon writes, “It is a remarkable fact that we do not read, in the New Testament, that any one of the twelve, except Judas, ever kissed Jesus. It seems as if the most impudent familiarity was near akin to dastardly treachery. This sign of Judas was typical of the way in which Jesus is generally betrayed. When men intend to undermine the inspiration of the Scriptures, how do they begin their books? Why, always with a declaration that they wish to promote the truth of Christ! Christ’s name is often slandered by those who make a loud profession of attachment to him, and then sin foully as the chief of transgressors. There is the Judas-kiss first, and the betrayal afterwards.”140 J. C. Ryle concurs with this observation:

Conduct like this, unhappily, is not without its parallels. The pages of history record many an instance of enormous wickedness wrought out and perfected under the garb of religion. The

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name of God has too often been pressed into the service of persecution, treachery, and crime. When Jezebel would have Naboth killed, she ordered a “fast to be proclaimed,” and false witnesses to accuse him of “blaspheming God and the king.” (1 Kings xxi. 9, 10.)—When Count de Monfort led a crusade against the Albigenses, he ordered them to be murdered and pillaged as an act of service to Christ’s Church. When the Spanish Inquisition tortured and burned suspected heretics, they justified their abominable dealings by a profession of zeal for God’s truth.—The false apostle Judas Iscariot has never wanted successors and imitators. There have always been men ready to betray Christ with a kiss, and willing to deliver the Gospel to its enemies under a show of respect.

Conduct like this, we need not doubt, is utterly abominable in the sight of God. To injure the cause of religion under any circumstances is a great sin, but to injure it while we pretend to show kindness is the blackest of crimes. To betray Christ at any time is the very height of wickedness, but to betray Him with a kiss, proves a man to have become a very child of hell.  

...c) Jesus was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Mt. 26:16). “Although the exact value of the silver pieces is not known, the amount was comparatively modest.” According to Exodus 21:32 thirty shekels is the replacement price of a slave. This paltry sum indicates that either Judas was very poor at bargaining or even more likely, money was not his primary motive. In any case, thirty shekels of silver for the Creator of the universe, the owner of the cattle on a thousand hills, is an insult of the highest order. Judas exchanged the Lord of life for a pittance of money.

The general consensus of commentators is that Judas joined himself to Christ and His cause because he believed that the Messiah would rule over a mighty earthly empire and that each of the apostles would become a powerful, wealthy prince. As the Savior drew closer to the cross and the true nature of the kingdom was becoming more apparent, Judas’ professed love of Jesus turned to hate. Judas did not want the Savior for who He truly was and he did not want the kind of kingdom that He was bringing into existence. His betrayal was rooted in his unwillingness to accept the truth, his disinclination to jettison his false anthropocentric theology and his love of money and power. Thus, he cast aside the Son of God for thirty pieces of silver. By his question—“What will you give me?”—he even allowed the enemies of Christ to determine the price. They probably deliberately gave Judas the price of a slave to emphasize their contempt for the Master. Every aspect of the betrayal is a knife into the heart of the Savior. Each historical event is a descending step of humiliation on the path to Golgotha.

The example of Judas is especially relevant to modern “evangelicals” who essentially sell out Christ for money, power and fame. They, of course, are not handing the Messiah over to be crucified. But they are betraying the teaching of the Savior in order to build their own little empires. One of the central conflicts that our Lord had with the Pharisees was over sola Scriptura (the Bible alone) verses human tradition. The church of Christ is only to worship God in a manner prescribed by Scripture. Yet most modern churches will have nothing to do with such a doctrine. The truth is that entertainment and humanistic gimmicks bring in the cash. And, sadly, the average churchgoer today loves to have it so.

They have a similar attitude to Judas’ when it comes to religion. They ask: “What will you give me?” “What’s in it for me?” “Do you have a good rock band?” “Is the service entertaining?” “Do you have an exciting youth group?” “Do you have non-doctrinal sermons with lots of jokes and stories?” “Are the sermons uplifting so they increase my self-esteem?” In

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142 Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28 (Waco, TX: Word, 1995), 761.
the name of church growth and love for the lost, churches betray Jesus for secular humanism dressed up in religious garb.

On a more personal level, we must always be on guard against the love of money and greed in our own hearts. In our consumer-oriented, capitalist culture, the sin which the world will not rebuke and ministers will scarcely touch is the inordinate love of money and the things money can buy. While a certain amount of money is necessary to support a family, it should never be a priority over service to Christ. How many professing Christians, by their actions, repeatedly place money above the Savior? How many families have left behind good, solid reformed churches to move to an area devoid of good preaching for the sake of a little extra money? There was a time in the not too distant past when good Presbyterians would not consider moving to any area unless there was a church with faithful theology, preaching and worship. But now the kingdom of God is often secondary to personal peace and prosperity. The love of money is the root of all sorts of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). We must beware lest we betray the cause of God and truth for money, for the things of this world, for trinkets which are passing away. If we don’t consider our blessed Redeemer first in all things; if we don’t place the truth of the gospel and biblical worship first; if we are not prepared to make sacrifices in our lifestyle to support the covenanted reformation, then we are making money our god.

d) There was humiliation in the manner in which our Lord was arrested. The sinless Savior was treated as a dangerous criminal. We see this in the arresting party and the weapons they carried.

The arresting party is described as a multitude by Mark and Luke while Matthew emphasizes the number with the phrase “a great multitude.” According to John’s account this crowd consisted of “a detachment of troops, and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees” (18:3). The Greek word speira translated as “detachment” (NKJV, NIV), “band” (KJV, RSV), or “cohort” (NASB) refers to a cohort or company of Roman soldiers. This word “is used everywhere in the New Testament only of Roman troops”143 (cf. Mt. 27:27; Mk. 15:16; Ac. 10:1; 21:31; 27:1). These troops were stationed at the tower or castle Antonia which was built by Herod the Great and named in honor of his old army associate, Mark Anthony. “The name Antonia is not used in the NT, but the castle is referred to as ‘the barracks’ (Ac. 21:34, etc.).”144 This fortress was at the Northwest corner of the Temple complex area. It was built on a hill that overlooked the Temple area and thus provided a perfect military station to guard against riots or insurrection.

Josephus tells us that these troops were very active at the time of the Passover. He writes in Antiquities 20, 5, 3, “When the feast called Passover was come, on which it is our custom to provide unleavened bread, and a great multitude of people from all places having come together to the feast, Cumanus feared that some insurrections might occur, and therefore gave orders that a cohort of soldiers with their swords should be established in the court of the Temple, in order to quell any such insurrections as might arise…. But the same thing was wont to be done by his predecessors in the government of Judea at the feast.”145 In his history of the Jewish war against Rome, Josephus gives us more details about this fortress. He writes, “But where it was connected with the Temple, there were steps by which the watchers (there was always a legion of Romans

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there) went down armed, and planted themselves in the courts at the feasts, to observe the people, that no uproar might arise.”

It was at the castle of Antonia that Paul would be imprisoned when he sought refuge from the Jews. As he ascended the steps from the court of the Gentiles up to the barracks (Ac. 21:31-22:29), he was permitted to address the Jews. Most scholars believe that Christ was tried at the Antonia fortress and that Pilate exhibited the Savior to the Jewish mob below as he stood on one of the castle’s balconies. Interestingly, Josephus tells us that “Titus made his grand assault upon the Temple area from the Castle Antonia.” The Jewish leadership turned to the Romans to help them destroy the Messiah because they feared they would lose their position of power, wealth and influence. The result of this unholy conspiracy was their own destruction by the pagan Romans.

The term “cohort” normally referred to one tenth of legion or six hundred soldiers (though in practice the number would fluctuate). In John 18:12 we are told that this “cohort” was commanded by a “captain.” The Greek word translated as “captain” or “commander” (chiliarchos) comes from chiliioi, “a thousand” and archon, “ruler.” It refers to an officer in charge of a large body of troops. This word coupled with “cohort” has led some commentators to the conclusion that a whole “cohort,” or around 600 soldiers, were involved in the arrest of Jesus. They argue that the Savior had so many followers that the Roman officials responsible for the security of the city during this festival were not going to take any chances.

The vast majority of commentators, however, believe that it is very unlikely that the whole cohort was involved in the arrest of the Savior. In fact, the term speira was used on occasion by the Romans to describe a maniple, which is only one third of a cohort or 200 men. But given the small number of disciples, even this seems rather large. Further, the whole point of arresting our Lord at night, in secret, away from the crowds was to avoid the possibility of a riot or insurrection. Therefore, John probably is “not saying that the whole speira was present, but rather [is] using a form of speech like our ‘the police came to arrest the man.’ Yet we must bear in mind that the Romans could use surprisingly large numbers of soldiers where one prisoner was in question (Acts 23:23).”

What is noteworthy about the location of the Roman garrison next to the Temple complex is that it explains how Judas and the Jewish leadership could so quickly organize an arresting party. After Judas went to the chief priests to inform them that immediate action was needed because Jesus knew about the plan to betray Him, a representative of the Sanhedrin or perhaps even the chief priest himself would have either contacted Pilate (the governor) or the commander of the garrison. If the second option occurred, the leader of the Roman forces would have then contacted Pilate before taking action. Matthew’s account of the trial (27:19) implies that Pilate already knew about Jesus’ case before the Savior was brought to him because his wife was

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146 Ibid.
148 The term speira (if the soldiers were legionaries) was generally equivalent to the Latin cohors, which numbered 600 men. Polybius, indeed, uses it (xi. 23. 1) for manipulus, which is only one third of a cohort. But here (if, as is probable, they were auxiliaries) and in the N. T. elsewhere (see. esp. Acts 21) it numbered 1000 men (240 horse and 760 foot), commanded by a chiliarch (cf. v. 12 below), a tribunus militum. It is not, however, to be supposed that Jn. means that the whole strength of the regiment (cf. Mk. 15) was turned out to aid in the arrest of Jesus; the words labon ten speiran indicate no more than that Judas had got the help of “the cohort,” i.e. a detachment, with whom the commanding officer of the garrison came (v. 12), in view of possible developments” (J. H. Bernard, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928], 2:584).
preoccupied with this matter earlier during the day. In any case, the time that elapsed between Judas’ arrival at the Temple complex and the arrest of Christ was no more than a few hours.

Accompanying the Roman cohort were the Temple guards. These were Levites who served as a security force for the Temple complex. They were under the command of the chief officer (Greek, *strategos*). The Temple guard had failed to arrest Jesus on an earlier occasion (Jn. 7:45) because they were amazed at His teaching. This time, however, the accompaniment of the Roman troops, along with Judas and Malchus (the high priest’s personal servant), would make sure this failure would not happen again. Matthew, Mark and John emphasize that this wicked multitude had the full authority of the chief priests and Pharisees behind them (Mk. 14:43; Mt. 26:47; Jn. 18:3).

The official soldiers and guards were also accompanied by a group of curious onlookers. For instance, Mark mentions a certain young man who apparently rushed out with only a linen cloth wrapped around his body. For some unstated reason he had to flee the authorities (Mk. 14:51); perhaps he objected to the arrest of Christ or was recognized as a disciple. In any case, an armed group with torches and lanterns of such a large size would naturally attract a lot of attention.

The synoptic gospels’ use of the word “multitude” (Gk. *ochlos*), which could be translated “crowd,” indicates that by the time the organized military guard reached Gethsemane it had the appearance of a mob armed with swords and staves or clubs. The Roman soldiers would have been equipped with armor and the short double edged sword. Many commentators believe the Jewish guards had clubs. However, there may have been a combination of both in that, according to Josephus, Roman soldiers would often use clubs for police actions or crowd control. Given the fact that the Romans probably viewed Jesus and his followers in a class similar to the zealots who were dangerous, they were probably well equipped. While Jewish travelers commonly carried a sword for defense there is no evidence that the Jewish police force carried swords.150

That the arrest of our Lord must be viewed as a part of His great humiliation is supported by Christ’s response to this mob recorded in all the synoptic gospels. “In that hour Jesus said to the multitudes, ‘Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs to take Me? I sat daily with you, teaching in the temple, and you did not seize Me. But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled’” (Mt. 26:55-56). The Greek word *lesten* can be translated as “robber,” “brigand,” “rebels,” or “insurrectionist.” The Jews knew that Jesus was not guilty of robbery, rebellion or any violent crime, yet they treated Him as if He were a highway robber. Christ reminds them of His peaceful teaching ministry in Jerusalem. The Jewish people in this crowd knew of His purity, holiness and innocence; yet, they would arrest Him and slay Him as a malefactor, a common violent criminal. “He expresses His indignation at this. It adds not a little to the depth of our Lord’s humiliation, that He consented to be hunted down thus by wicked men, and to be treated as if He had been the worst of mankind. The best of persons are more sensibly affected by the ill usage which wounds their reputation and honor, than they are by any other kind of injustice.”151 Matthew Henry writes, “He taught daily in the temple, and if he had any wicked design, there it would have some time or other have been discovered; nay, these officers of the chief priests, being retainers to the temple, may be supposed to have heard his sermons there (I was with you in the temple); and had he not taught them excellent doctrine, even his enemies themselves being judges? Were not all the words of his mouth in

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150 See E. W. Hengstenberg, 2:340.
righteousness? Was there any thing froward or perverse in them? Prov. viii. 8. By his fruits he was known to be a good tree; why did they come out against him as a thief?"152

Theological and Ethical Lessons from the Arrest of Christ

The arrest of the Savior contains a number of important theological and ethical lessons that should not be missed.

(1) The manner in which the Jews aligned themselves with heathen Rome in the arrest and execution of their Messiah is the reflection and capstone to a whole history of syncretism and apostasy. Jesus came to give the Jews salvation, to free them from bondage from Satan, sin and death. He was the ultimate fulfillment, the antitype to Israel’s redemption from slavery to heathen Egypt. The Savior came to bring men peace, freedom and salvation in the fullest sense of the term. He bid the Jews to give up their bondage saying, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30). The vast majority of Jews and almost the whole of the political and religious establishment in Israel rejected the Messiah and His gospel of peace in favor of bondage to Rome.

When the Jews summoned the aid of the Romans to take their own Messiah captive and put Him to death, they were making an agreement with their slave masters against God’s anointed. They in effect were saying, “We do not want your offered salvation; we prefer slavery to Egypt over a relationship with Jehovah.” “Rather than acknowledge the Messiah who promises liberty from every bondage, particularly from that of the curse and of death, they kiss the rod of those who tyrannize over them from Rome.”153 In their hatred and spiritual blindness, they embrace the dark empire of their own destruction.

God calls upon all nations and princes to kiss the Son, to serve the Lord with fear and trembling (see Ps. 2:11-12). All magistrates have a moral obligation to acknowledge Christ’s salvation, lordship, authority, and rule. But instead of offering Jesus the kiss of love, trust and submission, the Jews with the Romans give the Prince of Life the kiss of betrayal, hatred, rejection and death. When Pilate asked the Jews, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priest answered, ‘We have no king but Caesar’” (Jn. 19:15).

There is a sense in which apostasy is the opposite of biblical repentance. With repentance there is a turning from sin, idolatry and rebellion toward the true and living God. Slavery to sin is set aside as one bows the knee to the King of Righteousness. With apostasy, covenant people turn from their commitment to Christ toward sin and idolatry. They exchange their professed bond-service to the Savior for slavery to Satan and his kingdom. In the days of Jesus, the Jews were obsessed with self-righteousness, self-exaltation, power and prestige. Therefore, they betrayed their Messiah and clung to their Roman slave-master. Those who remain enslaved to their sins prefer to take captive the Emancipator of slaves. They suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). They do everything they can to push the Son of God out of their consciousness. They cry out, “Crucify Him. Put Him to death. Cast Him away. Place Him in the earth.” The light of Christ and His truth is more than they can bear. Thus, they declare, “We have no king but Caesar. We will not have this Man rule over us. Give us the devil. Give us slavery. Give us bondage. Give us anything but Jesus.” Why is this madness the root of apostasy?

152 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:555.
153 Klaas Schilder, Christ in His Suffering, 418.
Because, in God’s universe, there is no neutrality; there can be no fence-sitting. The covenant people had to align themselves with the Messiah or follow the world system, the satanic weltanschauung. And that is precisely what they did. To escape the Truth, incarnate and written, the Jews tightened the noose of unbelief and apostasy around their own necks and jumped into the abyss.

When we see the incredible hostility to Jesus and the gospel in our modern culture we must remember that the darkness has always hated the light and will do everything in its power to suppress it. Therefore, they came with torches and lanterns to arrest the Light of the world. In this act, treachery, apostasy, self-deception, blindness and spiritual slavery to the power of darkness all come together in a satanic harmony.

Should we not learn from their downfall? In light of our text we need to ask ourselves some searching questions. Do we betray our God by unlawful agreements with this world? Do we find ourselves in league with Satan by our acceptance of the state school system, religious pluralism, socialism, secular scientific myths and the like? How many professing Christians will be shocked on the final day to discover they have unwittingly covenanted with the devil against Christ and His kingdom? Do we betray the Christian faith by participating in the common sins of our culture such as fornication; pornography; drunkenness; gambling; watching lascivious plays, shows or movie; and attending Sabbath day sporting events? Are we aiding the forces of hell by corrupting the worship, teaching and government in our churches by adopting the ways of the world? We must never forget that the political and religious leaders who persecuted and murdered the Messiah believed they were serving God.

(2) The arresting party demonstrates the blindness and wickedness of unbelief and opposition to Christ. The Jewish police, the Roman soldiers and all the others involved witnessed the mighty power of the Messiah; yet, not one repented of their wickedness in opposing God’s Son. After Judas kissed the Savior and withdrew back into the mob, Jesus boldly stepped forward and asked the crowd, “‘Whom are you seeking?’ They answered Him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am He’…. Now when He said to them, ‘I am He,’ they drew back and fell to the ground” (Jn. 18:4-6).

This casting of the ungodly to the ground was an amazing, dramatic demonstration of the Savior’s power. Although some commentators attempt to explain this passage in a natural manner (i.e. they argue that Jesus’ courage and boldness in stepping forward to identify Himself caused the mob to step back and accidentally fall down), such a view is not at all tenable. Roman soldiers were trained to stand at attention and not even flinch under terrifying circumstances. Further, it is unlikely that they knew much of anything about this Nazarene. Clearly the Savior’s power knocked this large mob right off of its feet. “In the word ego eimi [I AM], the Lord uttered forth the dignity of His person. Accordingly He struck the multitude like a flash of lightning. Jesus thereby declared Himself to be He of whom the prophet said, ‘And He shall smite the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips shall He slay the wicked’ [Isa.11:4].”

What a display of power! Several hundred young, strong, armed men went backward and then fell completely to the ground as if struck by a giant invisible force. “This was a peculiar and divine power which Jesus intended to display, not only in order to frighten the Jews, but also to strengthen the disciples.”

The whole purpose of this display of power was to protect His disciples. John writes, “Then He asked them again, ‘Whom are you seeking?’ And they said, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus

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154 E. W. Hengstenberg, 2:343-344.
answered, ‘I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way’” (18:7-8). “The tender thoughtfulness of our Lord for His weak disciples is strikingly shown in this sentence. Even at this trying moment He thought more of others than of Himself.” He knew that He had to suffer and die and He also knew that the apostles must live on to receive power and preach the gospel. Thus, even in the arrest of Christ, we see the grace of God manifested. The disciples had been sleeping when they had been repeatedly commanded to watch and pray. They had failed to obey the Savior and were completely unprepared to meet the enemy. Yet, Jesus uses His divine power to protect them. He places them on the path to safety as He walks the painful road to His death. The disciples were delivered, not because they deserved it or earned it but because of Christ’s grace, love and compassion.

This act of grace was not merely for their temporal safety, but also for their eternal salvation. J. C. Ryle writes, “Our Lord’s preservation of His disciples included the means as well as the end. One means of preserving them from making shipwreck of the faith altogether, was to keep them from being tempted above what they could bear. Our Lord knew that they would be so tempted, and that their souls were not strong enough to bear the trial. If they had been taken prisoners and brought before Caiaphas and Pilate, with Himself, their faith would have failed entirely. He therefore provides for their escape, and overrules the plans of His enemies, so that the eleven were ‘let go.’” John’s gospel contains a comment that indicates that our Lord secured the safety of the disciples in direct fulfillment of His high priestly prayer in John 17 where Jesus prayed to the Father that “not one would be lost” (17:12). Although in this context it applies specifically to the apostles, it is true of all God’s elect. Jesus not only intercedes for us by His prayers but also takes direct action on our behalf so that every person bought with His blood will never suffer death but will be saved with an everlasting salvation.

The arresting party not only witnessed an amazing demonstration of the Savior’s power when they were involuntarily forced to the ground but they also witnessed the miraculous healing of the high priest’s servant (Malchus). Luke writes, “And He touched his ear and healed him” (22:51). Peter sliced off Malchus’ ear with a sword. It was a fresh, bloody wound. Then right in front of this mob the ear was instantly restored to normal. One would think that this second amazing sign would have at least some effect on the arresting crowd; yet, it didn’t. This raises the questions: (1) Why did these soldiers, Temple police and others who witnessed these signs continue their evil mission? (2) Were not these miracles indisputable proof that Jesus was the Son of God, the Jewish Messiah? There are a number of things to note regarding the fact that these proofs were completely ignored.

First, this event demonstrates the depravity of fallen man. The problem for unregenerate men is not that they do not have enough evidence for the truth about Christ, but that their hearts are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-5), hostile to God (Rom. 1:18-23), innately evil (Jn. 1:4-5; Rom. 3:12; 8:6-8), and completely blind to spiritual reality (1 Cor. 2:14). Paul says, “The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Apart from a direct work of the Holy Spirit upon the soul, fallen man is always attempting to push the true God out of his consciousness. He wants to live his life completely independent of the God who is. Therefore, he seeks to interpret “the facts” around Him without reference to God or the truth of Scripture.

Second, following our previous point we must not deal with unbelievers as if they were neutral with regard to human reason or objective factuality. What could be more objective proof than being an eyewitness of Christ’s divine power? These events in Gethsemane militate against what is called evidential apologetics. This school of thought teaches that Christianity can be demonstrated to be “highly probable” by a neutral appeal to “brute factuality.” In other words, the unbeliever can be won over to the truth of the Bible by appealing to “neutral” reason or to the “objective” empirical observations of science, archeology, history and so forth. The idea behind this type of apologetic is that we must approach the unbeliever with “objective facts” or “truth” in a manner that is acceptable to the natural man. Therefore (according to this view), the Bible cannot be the presupposition behind the presentation of “facts” or the manner in which we interpret factuality because this would violate the unbeliever’s concept of neutrality. The great problem with evidential apologetics is that it presupposes a semi-pelagian or Arminian concept of man. It presupposes that fallen man still has objectivity. The truth, however, is that the natural man, like the mob at Gethsemane, would rather commit intellectual and moral suicide than acknowledge the truth of God in Christ. Unsaved men can only acknowledge the truth about the Savior and submit to Him if they are first subdued by the Holy Spirit.

Third, given these truths we must do two things. We must never compromise, water down, or fail to appeal directly to the truths of Scripture when we reason with or witness to unbelievers. We must never tone down our message in order to make it acceptable to the natural man. When believers do this in the name of neutrality, they unwittingly set aside their only offense against unbelieving worldviews. Further, we must become adept at pointing out the unbelieving axioms or presuppositions that lie behind the unbeliever’s argumentation. If we argue in this manner, then, and only then, do the “objective” evidences become truly powerful, for they are placed on the sure foundation of Scripture.

The mob that went after Christ was living in a self-created world of absurdity. To the Jews, the cross was a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23). Therefore, they chose to believe in the absurd: that Satan himself was casting out demons and healing the sick (Mk. 3:22), even though both of these signs were completely contrary to the devil’s nature and kingdom. To the Romans and Greeks, the gospel was foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18-23). The idea that the path to kingdom victory was through humility, suffering and death was, according to their worldview, utterly absurd. The men who arrested Jesus were irrational, unjust and thoroughly wicked because their hearts were at enmity with God.

(3) The arresting party demonstrates the evil of unlawful ecclesiastical and civil authority. In other words, this motley crew should have refused to follow orders that were unjust or contrary to Scripture. The ecclesiastical authorities did not have any biblical right to hunt Jesus down as a criminal. The civil authorities did not have any just reason to pursue Christ or arrest Him. The concept of authority where lesser magistrates, police, soldiers or citizens are said to have a moral obligation to obey laws and commands that contradict the Bible is a chief foundation of some of the most wicked deeds throughout history. When Nazis were questioned at the end of World War II about their atrocities, they often considered themselves completely innocent of any wrong because they were simply following orders. They would shrug off their responsibility saying: “‘I saw women and children killed, but did not pay any attention to it; I have no opinion, I obey.’”158 By the standards of the caesar, the dictator, the lawless tyrant, such a response is perfect. It is what they strive for.

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The truly autonomous man operates on the principle of either total ethical chaos or even more often, the principle of blind obedience. This is the driving principle behind: the arrest of Christ; the operation of all occult groups; and, the function of all dictatorships whether Marxist, Fascist or “democratic.” The soldiers of Rome and virtually all armies throughout history have had this principle drilled into them. In Germany “the Fuhrer principle” (*Fuhrerprinzip*) “led, step by step to the surrender of the will of the people to the will of the Fuhrer, culminating in such confessions as that of Rudolf Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz, just before his execution in 1947, that he would have gassed and burned his own wife and children, and himself as well, if the Fuhrer had asked it.”

In modern culture, we must be especially aware of statist efforts to first atomize the individual by destroying the role of the family and the relevance of the church and then remake the individual into a lap dog of the state. The goal of the modern humanistic state is to mold individuals into obedient subjects through mass education and mass media. The ultimate goal of the state school in our day is not education, but rather the propagandizing of children. A good citizen is not the well-educated Christian who can think and make intelligent decisions according to a higher standard, a transcendental law-word; the statist instead wants the useful idiot, the mass man, the unthinking slave. Statism is dependant upon people who are happy to follow not only lies, but grand lies. The less people are able to think, the better. The state-indoctrinated idiot will do what he is told and will justify any behavior or decision of his political messiah whether Hitler, Stalin, Mao or Clinton.

The Bible warns us very carefully to avoid the unthinking, immoral, follow-the-crowd mentality. It warns us regarding the dangers of blind obedience to authority. Exodus 23:3 reads, “You shall not follow a crowd to do evil; nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after many to pervert justice.” While most people prefer to conform themselves to current wicked social norms and pressures in either an active or passive manner, God declares such conformity to be evil and under His judgment. “Clearly the Hebrew law is cognizant of the economic, social, and political pressures which are exercised upon one who has allowed himself to become involved with special interest groups.”

The crowd that arrested Jesus followed the majority to do evil. They were willing to kill the Prince of Life and go to hell to fit in with the crowd. What does our text say about modern, antinomian democracy which implicitly says, “The voice of the people is the voice of God?” It unequivocally condemns democracy because it places the will of the crowd over the rule of law (i.e. God’s law).

(4) During the arrest of the Savior, the disciples received a warning regarding the use of carnal weapons in defense of Christ and His kingdom. After our Lord was betrayed with a kiss and the disciples saw that Jesus was being taken into custody they asked, “Lord, shall we strike with the sword?” (Lk. 22:49). (We are told earlier at the Lord’s supper that the apostles were in possession of two swords [Lk. 22:38].) Before Christ has time to answer this question Peter steps forward and attempts to kill Malchus—the servant of the high priest. (Apparently Malchus was in charge of this expedition and was standing in front of the crowd next to Jesus.) Malchus moves to avoid having his skull sliced open and the result is that his ear is severed (Mk. 14:47; Mt. 26:51; Lk. 22:50; Jn. 18:10). (Interestingly, all the synoptic gospels, which are written much earlier than the gospel of John, omit the names of Peter and Malchus. Apparently, they did not want to get Peter in trouble with the authorities. John, writing after Peter and Malchus are dead, is free to name names.) Apparently, after Peter saw the magnificent exhibition of the Savior’s

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159 Ibid, 46-47.
power in subduing this large, armed mob, he thought that if he began a fight the Lord would be forced to take decisive action to end it. Once again we see that Peter and the disciples at this point have a very poor understanding of the gospel and the nature of Christ’s kingdom.

Our Lord’s response to Peter’s rash, impulsive, foolish act deserves careful consideration. “Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus’” (Mt. 26:52-54)? John’s account adds the statement, “Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?” (18:11). Luke the physician says that the Savior then reached out, “touched his ear and healed him” (22:51). There are four things that we need to examine in this response.

First, Jesus condemns the unlawful use of violence. The proverbial saying “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” is an allusion to Genesis 9:6, “Whosever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed.” This passage is the first explicit statement in the Bible of the death penalty for murder. The people who came to arrest the Messiah were dangerous and wicked. However, they were the lawful authorities in Israel. Further, at the arrest of the Savior, there was no immediate threat on our Lord’s life. Jesus had to be tried and turned over to the Romans before He could be killed. Christ is telling Peter, in no uncertain terms, that if he used the sword to kill Malchus he would be executed as a murderer. Peter did not have the biblical right to slay Malchus. Calvin writes, “By these words, Christ confirms the precept of the Law, which forbids private individuals to use the sword. And above all, we ought to attend to the threatening of punishment which is immediately added; for men did not at their own pleasure, appoint this punishment for avenging their own blood; but God himself, by severely prohibiting murder, has declared how dearly he loves mankind.” The Savior in this statement is explicitly upholding the death penalty for murder.

Our Lord’s statement raises a question. Is Jesus teaching that believers in every case are forbidden to use deadly violence for self-defense? No, not at all! Peter struck a representative of the government who had not even unsheathed his sword. There was no excuse for Peter’s behavior whatsoever. However, God’s Word does sanction the use of deadly force by a private citizen under certain circumstances. For example, God’s law permits a homeowner to use deadly force when necessary if someone breaks into his house (Exodus 22:2). We are allowed to use only the force necessary to protect life and limb. We are not permitted to use force because we think something bad will happen; there must be an immediate threat.

Second, Jesus was condemning the use of the sword by professing Christians when seeking to defend Christ’s cause or promote Christianity. If believers resorted to carnal weapons to spread the kingdom of God, they would stain the good name of their Master and bring ruin on themselves. The Savior’s kingdom is not of this earth. As our Lord said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36).

The kingdom that Jesus established is unlike the Old Covenant nation of Israel which won their land by sword and battle. It is a spiritual kingdom that originates from heaven. The gospel is not to be spread like Islam which is in a perpetual state of war and violence. It is spread by the spiritual sword, the sword of the Spirit. The sword that proceeds from the white horse rider’s mouth, which conquers all nations, is the Word of God (Rev. 19:15; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12). Therefore, Paul could write: “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to

161 John Calvin, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, 3:244.
the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

The Savior and Paul admonish us not to use carnal weapons in our fight with Satan and his minions, because carnal weapons do not work in this kind of fight. Sadly, the history of the church is full of examples of professing Christians who thought they knew better and thus attempted to defeat the world with their own weapons. This calls to mind the secular empire of the Pope, the crusades, the inquisitions and the savage persecution of people who were minding their own business. Even Christian nations (where the civil magistrate has covenanted with the Messianic King) do not have a biblical right to attack heathen countries unless they are attacked first. The kingdom of God is not to be spread through the offensive, coercive use of arms. If the sword is used to make converts, then such converts are usually useless anyway because they are hypocrites. True religion begins in the heart with the new birth, not with a gun to one’s head. External force only produces external professors of religion.

In our pluralistic culture, where even false satanic religions have virtually complete freedom, evangelicals will sometimes praise their own enlightened thinking, as they look back in horror at the blood-stained hands of the papal church. Even so, they themselves are often guilty of violating this principle in their own unique way. While it is true that they are not using weapons or physical coercion in gaining converts, they are still fighting this war with the arm of flesh—human wisdom and philosophies. They depend on the weaponry devised by the church growth experts with their business model of leadership, secular sociology, pagan psychology and Madison Avenue methodology. They think they can build the kingdom of God with the fleshly attractions of entertainment, massive buildings, programs and gimmicks.

These kinds of weapons do not and cannot make a dent in the strongholds of Satan. Although these carnal weapons make for large churches and big budgets, they do not extend Christ’s dominion over this earth. The church is only assured of victory if it preaches the whole counsel of God. The weapon scorned by the world and yet most feared by the powers of darkness is the truth of God’s Word preached and taught with the unction of the Spirit and saturated by prayer. When believers water down the truth, adulterate it and make it more palatable to the world, they turn the sharp two-edged sword that God has placed in their hands into a butter knife.

Our Lord’s statement about the sword presupposes the biblical teaching regarding the separation between the domain of the political state and the domain of the church. Although the church speaks to every area of life in its prophetic role as the expositor of Scripture, it does not have the authority to use political coercion to advance the work of Christ’s kingdom of grace. “In accordance with the type of salvation he brought, Christ refused to have the people make Him their revolutionary King (Jn. 6:15).”\textsuperscript{162} Peter’s act had to be condemned for it not only would have been murder, but it also was an implicit act of revolution against the state. As members of a spiritual kingdom we must use weapons suitable to Christ’s reign. Therefore, Paul exhorts believers to put on the “sword of the spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17).

Third, our Lord made it clear to Peter and everyone present that He did not need or want anyone’s physical protection. This point is demonstrated by Jesus’ person and by His divine authority. Only seconds before Peter’s rash act, our Lord demonstrated that He had complete control of the situation. He flattened His enemies by the word of His power. The Savior also appeals to His authority as the Son of God. He said to Peter, “Or do you think that I cannot now

pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?” (Mt. 26:53). A Roman legion amounted to about six thousand troops. Therefore, our Lord is referring to an enormous number of around 72,000 angels. The number twelve is often symbolic in Scripture. Perhaps Jesus is saying that He could summon six thousand angels for each disciple and Himself. To understand the destructive capacity of such an angelic army, consider the fact that during the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib, king of Assyria, a single angel killed one hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrian troops in one night (see 2 Kings 19:35). “This is the consciousness with which Jesus goes into his death: at any moment, at his simple word, the sky could blaze forth with a tremendous host of mighty angels, whose swords could annihilate all these or any other enemies of his. That is the real help Jesus can call.”163 Given this reality, it is absurd and rather pathetic for Peter to swing his little sword.

The obvious implication of our Lord’s statement to Peter is that His refusal to appeal to His Father to intervene on His behalf in sending this angelic army indicates that He is resolute to lay down His life as a voluntary sacrifice. Matthew Henry writes,

Note. God has no need of us, of our services, much less of our sins, to bring about his purposes; and it argues our distrust and disbelief of the power of Christ, when we go out of the way of our duty to serve his interests. God can do his work without us; if we look into the heavens, and see how he is attended there, we may easily infer, that though we be righteous, he is not beholden to us, Job xxxv. 5, 7. Though Christ was crucified through weakness, it was a voluntary weakness; he submitted to death, not because he could not, but because he would not contend with it. This takes off the offense of the cross, and proves Christ crucified the power of God; even now in the depth of his sufferings he could call in the aid of legions of angels.164

When our Lord hung on the cross and His enemies mocked Him saying, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save” (Mt. 27:42; cf. Lk. 23:35; Mk. 15:31), they revealed their spiritual blindness; for Jesus refused to save Himself even though He could in order to save others. He had to die if anyone was to be saved. What love is this that a sinless perfect Man would voluntarily die for His enemies?

From Jesus’ statement to Peter we can infer some important things. a) Not only is the idea of a Christian revolution unbiblical, it also demonstrates a lack of faith in the Savior’s power and promises. Earlier, our Lord explicitly taught the principle of Christian physical non-resistance to the heathen state. He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two” (Mt. 5:38-41). In this last sentence our Lord is referring to the Roman soldier’s practice of “commandeering” civilian labor in occupied countries. This servitude was involuntary. “The Jews fiercely resented such impositions, and Jesus’ choice of this example deliberately dissociates him from militant nationalists. Rather than resisting, or even resenting, the disciple should volunteer for a further mile (the Roman term for 1,000 paces, rather less than our mile).”165

Christ is not saying that believers cannot defend themselves against a rapist, murderer or thief. But that we must not lose our tempers, get excited, become obsessed or spend all our

164 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:402.
165 R. T. France, Matthew, 127.
energies fighting against an oppressive state. If Christians insist on perfect justice from the state and spend all their time on political activism, protest and so forth, the gospel will not hold the center stage and people will not be truly changed. The Jewish Zealots, the revolutionaries, were successful in turning Israel into a wasteland full of rotting corpses while the Christians who went calmly to their deaths in the Roman arenas were instrumental in changing a whole culture from the inside out.

Our Lord wants us to be polite, gentle and kind to our political oppressors so that our meek, holy behavior will not turn unbelievers away from the glad tidings we present. Thus, Christ says that if a “soldier comes along and says you have to carry his baggage for a mile, not only do it cheerfully, but go the second mile. The result will be that when you arrive this soldier will say: ‘Who is this person? What is it about him that makes him act like this? He is doing it cheerfully, and is going beyond his duty.’ And they will be driven to the conclusion: ‘This man is different, he seems to be unconcerned about his own interests.’ As Christians, our state of mind and spiritual condition should be such that no power can insult us.”

b) Another closely related principle to the Savior’s injunction to Peter is that even when we are treated unjustly by our enemies, personal vengeance is not an option for the Christian. We must trust God in these kinds of situations and appeal to the biblical promises that such gross injustices will be recompensed by the Lord Almighty Himself. Paul writes, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse…. Repay no one evil for evil…. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. Therefore, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap ‘coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:14, 17, 19-21).

Fourth, Jesus makes restitution on behalf of Peter. Satan wanted to use this evil posse not only to arrest and kill the Messiah but also to stamp out the movement that the Savior had begun. Peter had given the devil a perfect opportunity. If a battle could be established because of his act of violence and the Redeemer did not intervene, the mob would have used the apostle’s act as a reason to cut the disciples down or at least arrest them. Therefore, Christ had to take decisive action. He says, “Permit even this” (Lk. 22:51). The Greek literally has the sense of “no more of this.” To paraphrase, “everyone stop this violence at once.” Jesus in effect is placing Himself between two groups on the verge of total bloodshed.

Then to ensure that peace is maintained and He is the only one taken, Christ heals Malchus’ ear with a touch. This healing demonstrates that our Lord was concerned with the law of God being obeyed even in such extraordinary circumstances. The Old Testament law required an “ear for an ear” or at least that a fine be paid to the victim to make restitution for the loss of his ear (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Dt. 19:21). By immediately restoring the ear of the servant of the high priest to perfection, our Lord was not asking the arresting party to ignore a violation of the law, but to recognize that restitution had been made.

One thing that is very interesting about this healing is that the Savior healed a man who had no faith in God whatsoever. In fact, He healed an enemy of the kingdom. This example means that Jesus can heal people who do not have faith. He is sovereign over this power. Does this healing contradict earlier passages where faith is connected in some manner to the exercise of this power (e.g., Mt. 8:10; 9:22, 29; 15:28; Mk. 5:34; Lk. 17:19; 18:42; etc)? Or other passages where unbelief results in a lack of miracles (e.g., Mt. 13:58 reads, “Now He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.”)? No, there is no contradiction. Obviously

people who do not believe in Jesus are not going to flock to Him to be healed. The people of Nazareth rejected Him and thus ignored Him. But, the small numbers that did have faith came to Him and were healed. “It is not necessary to go to the extreme of saying that no one was ever miraculously healed by Jesus unless he wholeheartedly believed in him with a faith to which nothing was lacking (see, for example, Luke 17:1-17 [note also, the man born blind was healed before he even knew who Jesus was, see Jn. 9:6-12]). On the other hand, it would be foolish to deny that divinely imparted faith was a great help (Matt. 8:10; 9:22, 28, 29; Mark 9:23), and that stubborn unbelief was a tremendous hindrance!”

The healing of Malchus disproves the whole word of faith movement (e.g., Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, etc) which teaches that God’s power is limited by man’s faith expressed in audible words. Christ is sovereign and can heal when and where He pleases.

Fifth, the Lord appeals to the need to fulfill prophecy and the necessity of His atoning death. Matthew says, “How then could the Scripture be fulfilled, that it must happen thus” (26:54)? John adds, “Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me” (18:11)? The Savior makes it clear to His disciples that the prophecies regarding Him are as unchangeable as God Himself who stands behind His Word. Prophecies reveal to us the decreetive will of God. Therefore, they are eternal (i.e. they originate in the Divine being which is not limited by time or a succession of movements); efficacious (i.e. God, by a direct application of His power, ensures that what He determines will certainly come to pass); immutable (i.e. they are not subject to change because God Himself is immutable and faithful); unconditional (i.e. they are not conditioned or subject to change by anything in creation); and totally comprehensive (in other words, there is nothing in the created realm that exists and functions outside of God’s absolute control). When God says by the mouth of His prophets that certain things must come to pass regarding the Messiah, they must come to pass. Jehovah is in control of the ends as well as the means to the ends.

Our Lord’s appeal for the need to fulfill prophecy is an implicit rebuke to the disciples for their poor understanding of Scripture and their misunderstandings regarding Messianic expectations. For many centuries God had graciously given Israel continuing revelations about the coming of Christ and had committed these prophecies to writing. The Hebrew expectation of a coming Redeemer had the seal of divine authority and served to give the covenant people hope during times of darkness and affliction. The promise of the Messiah was a means of strengthening faith in Jehovah in times of calamity and of promoting genuine piety and true devotion toward God. God used these prophecies to speak the gospel to people living yet under tutelage to the weak and beggarly elements of the law. Prophecy was extremely important because one of its main objects was to prepare the way for Christ, so that when He came, He could readily be identified by a comparison of the prediction with its fulfillment. Thus, our Lord appealed to the necessity of fulfilling prophecy (Mt. 26:54) and even rebuked the two disciples from Emmaus after the resurrection saying, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into his glory?” (Lk. 24:25-26).

The disciples should have understood that the prophecies regarding the Messiah had to come to pass. They had already observed some amazingly accurate predictions come true. Psalm 41:9 spoke of the betrayal by Judas, “Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.” The prophet Zechariah said that Jesus would be

betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (11:12). And, there were many prophecies yet to be fulfilled. In Psalm 22 we have an explicit description of the crucifixion where the crowds mock the Savior (vs. 7, 8, 12, 13); where even Gentiles stand around the cross (v. 16); His bones are out of joint from hanging on the cross (v. 14); while His sinless blood gushes out of His body like water (v. 14). Zechariah speaks of God the Father striking His close companion—His only Son with the sword of justice (13:7). Jehovah is the first cause of the death of His shepherd and the human authors are second causes; they are instruments in His hand. In Isaiah 53 we are told of the Roman scourging that brings spiritual healing to the elect (v. 5). The Messiah’s behavior at His trial is described: “He was oppressed and afflicted yet He opened not His mouth, He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearer is silent” (v. 8); “He bore the sins of many” while “He poured out His soul unto death (v. 12).”

Although we may excuse the disciples for overlooking some of the more obscure prophecies regarding the Savior, there is no excuse for overlooking Isaiah 53. The disciples should have known that Jesus could only forgive sin and obtain victory through the blood of the cross. Christ had to be offered as a sin offering, a propitiatory sacrifice in order to procure for us forgiveness and righteousness. Given the perspicuous nature of many of the Messianic predictions, our Lord’s words to Peter are a stinging rebuke. To attempt to stop the crucifixion is a manifestation of unbelief and an unwillingness to submit to the holy Scriptures. Thus, the Savior tells Peter to relent, otherwise how would all these prophecies be fulfilled? How would all the types regarding the atonement find their anti-type? How would God’s justice be satisfied against sin? If Peter had his way, then the true biblical religion would have been completely overthrown. There would be no salvation and consequently no resurrection victory.

Whether Peter knew it or not he had allowed his personal friendship with Jesus and his defective knowledge of Scripture interfere with the gospel. We must learn from Peter’s great error that friendship must never be allowed to alter our interpretation of Scripture or our obedience to the moral absolutes of God’s law. A study of church history reveals that very often new heresies were tolerated and allowed to spread because of personal allegiances. We must be willing to rebuke error even in our closest friends and relatives.

It is interesting that when Jesus addressed Peter and the apostles He appealed to the need to fulfill prophecy; but, when He addressed His enemies He said, “But this is your hour, and the power of darkness” (Lk. 22:53). Christ tells His enemies that, “this is the period of time appointed beforehand by God for you wicked men who are acting under the power of Satan to have your evil way with Me.” These should have been chilling words to the Jews in the mob. Our Lord is saying a number of profound things in this statement. For one, He is emphasizing the sovereignty of God in these events. Our Lord wanted them to know that they were only able to take Him prisoner and abuse Him because God foreordained or decreed it. Once again the Savior is emphasizing that God appointed the crucifixion and the Son voluntarily went to His bloody, agonizing death. “Christ determines the hour of His death, as a voluntary victim who offered Himself not out of [external] necessity, but out of choice and love.”169

Also, He is saying that these wicked men are instruments in the devil’s hand. God is allowing “the darkness” (the forces of Satan, the devil and all his demons) this short period of time to have an apparent victory over God’s Son. “That which was taking place involved a far deeper opposition than that between Jewish leadership and Jesus. It involved the cosmic opposition between Satan, the ruler of this age and God (cf. Acts 26:18; cf. also Luke 22:3,

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With the arrest and binding of Christ the spiritual conflict that began with the protoevangelium in Genesis 3:15 and continued through history comes to a head. Yet the battle takes a perplexing turn. In this battle the holy angels of God must sheath their swords, step back and watch. “Michael must put up his sword; Gabriel may not unsheathe his; neither of these two may move against Satan…. All the angels are held back in order that all of the devils can move upon Gethsemane and Golgotha freely.”

The high noon of history has come. With God’s permission the devil and his unholy forces come. Like hungry lions they pounce upon the Savior. “God Himself throws open the doors of the prison-house of hell; and all the ominous demons creep out of it and rush to Jesus, to hiss and sting Him unto death.” Why does God allow the forces of darkness to bind His Son, spit in His face, beat Him without mercy and torture Him to death? The reason is that Jesus had to become a curse. He had to bear our sins in His own body on the tree. God was blowing the flames of His wrath against sin into a white hot heat to forever take away our sins, our guilt, our punishment and send them into oblivion. The most important and decisive battle in all human and angelic history was fought alone. The disciples and the holy angels could do nothing but stand back, wait and watch. Only the divine-human Mediator could defeat Satan, sin and death. Do you now understand why He is exalted above all thrones, principalities and powers? When we see Him we will cast our crowns at His pierced feet for He achieved everything while we earned nothing. What a glorious salvation!

We find the capstone to Christ’s rebuke to Peter in John 18:11 where our Lord says, “Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me.” In Gethsemane we saw references to the cup (see Mt. 26:36; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:42), but here the Savior explicitly assigns the origin of the “cup” to His Father. In essence He says, “Peter do you not understand that these events are not arbitrary but come directly from My Father? Do you not understand that I came to obey the will of My Father?” “Shall Jesus, who has come for the very purpose of doing his Father’s will, now evade that will and refuse the cup?”

God’s Son had agreed to drink this cup in the covenant of redemption, in the eternal counsels of the trinity. To come to earth and not drink the cup is unthinkable. To refuse the cup renders the whole purpose of the incarnation null and void. To refuse the cup leaves all of God’s elect in their sins, condemned to hell. To refuse the cup leaves all the nations firmly in the hands of Satan. To drink this cup was the most important event in the Savior’s life and the most important event relating to our lives. Without it, we are forever lost, doomed and damned to hell. Without it, there can be no peace with God; no justification in the heavenly court; no adoption into the family of God and no glorification before the throne.

Our Lord’s statement to Peter is given with an absolute resolve. The temptation to refuse the cup, which bore down on the Savior in Gethsemane only moments before, had been fully overcome when Jesus agonized and intensely prayed in the garden. The Father answered His prayers by strengthening His human nature, so that He would submit entirely to His Father’s will. The arrest, trial and crucifixion of Christ show a complete willingness to suffer. “What an example this is for all believers in the time of trouble! Like our Master we may pray about it, and

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171 Klaas Schilder, Christ in His Suffering, 438.
172 Ibid, 439.
hope that like Him we shall obtain help by prayer. What a proof this is of our Lord’s power to sympathize with suffering believers. He knows their conflicts by experience.”

Seized and Bound

After our Lord’s last miracle and last exhortation to Peter, He is seized and bound. John tells us that the Roman cohort, the chiliarch and the temple police were all involved in the arrest. The binding of prisoners was a common practice when arresting criminals. It involved tying the hands together at the wrists behind the back. According to the church fathers the cord used cut through the Savior’s flesh leaving a trail of blood from the garden to the house of Annas. The hands that healed the sick with a touch; that blessed the heads of covenant infants; that washed the feet of the disciples are bound by sinners. What indignity and humiliation! The hands that had done nothing but good and mercy are tied together like a dangerous beast. “[T]he one who had come into the world to bring freedom, and apart from whom freedom is absolutely impossible (see on 8:31-36), was himself bound. He was bound, however, in order that we might be loosed from our sins.”

It is at this point in the narrative that all the disciples forsake Jesus and flee (Mt. 26:56; Mk. 14:50). When they saw their Master seized by the authorities and bound their faith staggered. They now know beyond a shadow of a doubt that “Jesus does not intend to resist arrest, and is prepared to go to his death. The increased fears of recent days have been proved valid, and their resolution crumbles.” Their hope that the Lord would use His mighty power to crush this mob was smitten to the dust. The Savior knew that this would occur for it was prophesied in Scripture (Zech. 11:12) and He Himself had foretold this dark event (Mk. 14:29-31). Christ knew the disciples better than they knew themselves. He knew that their understanding of the kingdom was defective and that they were weak spiritually. When the fierce wolves came, the sheep turned their back on their shepherd and fled for their own safety. “It would have been to the eternal honor of any one of the disciples to have kept close to Christ right up to the last; but neither the loving John nor the boastful Peter stood the test of that solemn time. Human nature is such poor stuff, even at its best, that we cannot hope that any of us would have been braver or more faithful than the apostles were.” In the drama of redemption it was necessary that Jesus suffer humiliation, indignity and heart pain to the uttermost; therefore, His beloved disciples and closest friends must abandon Him to the satanic forces. Our Lord must face the cup alone. Hell is a place of perpetual loneliness, dread and anguish. Christ will endure the suffering of hell as a totally forsaken Man.; deserted by his friends and even worse, much worse, abandoned by God.

175 The fact that the Roman soldiers and their commanding officer are mentioned first implies that they played the leading role in seizing and binding the Savior. The verb seized (Gk. sunelabon) is a technical word for making an official arrest (see A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, 5:286 and William Hendriksen, The Gospel of John, 2:385). It was also the common practice of the Jewish authorities at that time to bind people when arrested to be brought before the Sanhedrin (see Ac. 9:1, 2, 14, 21; 12:6, etc; see Hengstenberg, Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, 2:351).
As we come to an end of our section dealing with the arrest of Christ we must not fail to notice the amazing contrast between Jesus and all those around Him. The Savior’s obedience to God’s will, holiness and perfect righteousness stands in sharp contrast to the wicked, corrupt, vile behavior and motives of the arresting party. His meekness, mercy and devotion are radically different from the violent, uncaring rabble. The Lord’s courage, calmness and determination also stand in sharp contrast to the cowardice, carelessness and panic of the disciples. In this narrative and the one to follow, the Messiah’s divinity, moral perfection and spiritual stature in bringing redemption to His people demonstrates Him to be infinitely greater than all the sinful mere mortals of history. The gospel narratives prove that our faith in Jesus should be strong and unshakable. Also, this teaching should bend our hearts in devotion to this Mediator. No matter what happens around Him, He is the Rock; He is faithful; He will never fail. Salvation is totally of grace because it is achieved by Christ alone. So often, because of the flesh, we are like the disciples. But, thank God, Christ is not like us. “Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37). What a glorious and beautiful Redeemer we serve!

Chapter 4: The Ecclesiastical Trial of Jesus—The Preliminary Hearing

Introduction

When we discuss the trial of Christ we are actually considering two separate trials: the one ecclesiastical, the other civil. Each trial consists of three separate stages. The Jewish trial involved: a) an informal preliminary hearing before Annas (Jn. 18:12ff.); b) an informal trial before the high priest Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (Mt. 26:57-68; Mk. 14:53-65; Lk. 22:54, 63-65; Jn. 18:24); and c) the formal trial by the Sanhedrin (Mt 27:1; Mk. 15:1; Lk. 22:66-71). The reason there is so much maneuvering and preliminary discussion on the part of the Jewish leadership is that they had determined to have Jesus put to death before the trial began which was by no means an easy task. They had to figure out what to charge Christ with that was a death penalty offense. They had to find false witnesses to testify against Him and had to get an ecclesiastical conviction. Then, they had to formulate the charges in a way that would merit the death penalty before the Roman magistrate. The Sanhedrin did not possess the power of capital punishment (see Jn. 18:31). The death penalty was the personal prerogative of Pilate, the Roman governor.

The civil trial also has three phases. a) Jesus is placed before Pilate who asks some preliminary questions (Mt. 27:2, 11-14; Mk. 15:1-5; Lk. 23:1-5; Jn. 18:28-38); b) Pilate, who apparently does not want to have to deal with Christ, sends the Savior over to Herod (Lk. 23:6-12). (Jesus was from Galilee, Herod’s jurisdiction, and Herod was in town for the feast.); c) Herod then sends Jesus back to Pilate who holds a formal hearing, releases Barabbas and condemns Christ to be crucified (Mt. 27:15-26; Mk. 15:6-15; Lk. 23:13-25; Jn. 18:39-40).

In the midst of the narratives of our Lord’s trial, all four gospels record the three denials by Peter (Mk. 14:54, 66-72; Mt. 26:58, 69-75; Lk. 22:54-62; Jn. 18:15-18, 25-27). In addition, Matthew records the remorse and suicide of Judas the betrayer (Mt. 27:3-10; Luke tells us of Judas’ end in Acts 1:18, 19). By placing Peter’s denial in the midst of our Lord’s trial, God is setting forth a sharp contrast between the Savior and Peter. Under extreme pressure Christ
remains firm and faithful while Peter crumbles. The evangelists, writing under divine inspiration, repeatedly are willing to show the disciples in a bad light to: a) exalt the Lord Jesus Christ as the sinless Redeemer; (“Was it not suitable that He should first paint a dark background, so that the perfections of the Holy One might be brought into a sharper relief?”; b) magnify the grace of God by demonstrating that the best of saints are still in themselves moral failures; and c) demonstrate how and how not to respond to trials and temptations.

The trial of Jesus is another step downward into the abyss of humiliation and suffering. The Sanhedrin, which was supposed to be a model of justice and integrity, becomes the instrument of the greatest travesty of justice in all of human history. “The time and nature of its meetings, the manner in which the ‘trial’ was conducted, its strange outcome—all point to the intent desire of the Jewish authorities to do away with Jesus. Here we have a group of desperate men who, while trying to keep a show of propriety and at least a semblance of ‘legality,’ take what can only be regarded as very desperate measures.” These wicked men have no regard, whatsoever, for God’s holy law or justice.

Before Annas

Then the band and the captain and officers of the Jews took Jesus, and bound him, and led him away to Annas first; for he was father in law to Caiaphas, which was the high priest that same year. Now Caiaphas was he, which gave counsel to the Jews, that it was expedient that one man should die for the people… The high priest then asked Jesus of his disciples, and of his doctrine. Jesus answered him, “I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing. Why askest thou me? Ask them which heard me, what I have said unto them: behold, they know what I said.” And when he had thus spoken, one of the officers which stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, “Answerest thou the high priest so?” Jesus answered him, “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?” Now Annas had sent him bound unto Caiaphas the high priest. (Jn. 18:12-14, 19-24)

After our Lord was arrested and bound He was taken to the house of Annas via the brook Kedron and was led into Jerusalem by the sheep-gate. The book Kedron was the dumping ground of the blood and filth left over from the sacrifices from the temple. During the great feasts it ran red with blood. The sheep-gate was the entrance point for the sacrificial animals on their way to the slaughter. The Roman soldiers and temple police were completely unaware that by their unholy actions they were being used of God to fulfill “to the very letter the significant types which God had ordained in the law of Moses.”

The fact that Jesus is taken to Annas prior to His appearance before the Sanhedrin raises a few questions. First, why does our Lord appear before Annas? And, second, what took place at this clandestine meeting?

The answer to the first question is found in the person of Annas himself. John explains it in terms of Annas’ relationship to Caiaphas: “for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was the high priest that year” (Jn. 18:13). This statement is the apostle’s way of telling us that Annas was an exceedingly powerful, perhaps the most influential person among the Jewish leadership.
Annas was appointed to the office of high priest by Quirinius, the Roman governor in A.D. 6, and served in this capacity until the year 15 when he was removed by the Roman procurator Valerius Gratus. Under biblical law the high priest was to serve for life, but the Romans removed and appointed the high priest when it served their purposes. “With the money-changing and the sale of sacrificial animals, a high priest at this time could become a millionaire within a year, and would be a powerful and dangerous man. As a result, frequent rotations were made mandatory by the Romans.”

Every man who served as high priest and was removed by Rome retained the title after his removal from office. (This practice of retaining the title for life is the same in the United States where all ex-presidents are addressed as Mr. President.) Annas had been removed by the Romans because he was very capable and had amassed a great deal of influence and power in his position.

The thing that sets Annas apart from other ex-high priests was his ability to hang on to power after his official term. Five of Annas’ sons and a grandson would become high priests after his term and Caiaphas, who served between two of Annas’ sons, was married to his daughter. Thus, his family “had a monopoly of the high-priestly office during the period A.D. 17-41.” Indeed, it is likely that Caiaphas became the high priest due to the power brokering and political maneuvering of his father-in-law. The influence of Annas is indicated in two passages by Luke. Near the beginning of his gospel he writes, “While Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness” (Lk. 3:2).

Although there were a number of high priests between Annas and Caiaphas, Luke only mentions Annas because he still (albeit unofficially) held the reins of power. Likewise in Acts 4:5-6 when Luke describes the assembled Sanhedrin he lists Annas before Caiaphas, the “official” high priest: “And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest…..”

Annas was the elder statesman of the Sanhedrin (“He was an old man of seventy,”) who not only held the reins of power, but was also thoroughly corrupt. D. M. Edwards writes,

Annas belonged to the Sadducean aristocracy, and, like others of that class, he seems to have been arrogant, astute, ambitious, and enormously wealthy. He and his family were proverbial for their rapacity and greed. The chief source of their wealth seems to have been the sale of requisites for the temple sacrifices, such as sheep, doves, wine, and oil, which they carried on in the four famous “booths of the sons of Annas” on the Mt. of Olives, with a branch within the precincts of the temple itself. During the great feasts, they were able to extort high monopoly prices for their goods. Hence our Lord’s strong denunciation of those who made the house of prayer “a den of robbers.”

Even the Jewish Talmud (“The body of Jewish and canonical law, consisting of the combined Mishnah, or text, and Gemara, or commentary; also restrictedly, the Gemara alone.”), which was compiled long after the death of Annas, recognizes the corruption of Annas. It says, “Woe to the family of Annas! Woe to the serpent like hisses’ (probably the

whisperings of Annas and the members of his family, seeking to bribe and influence the judges.)”

Now that we have an understanding of who Annas was, there are other related reasons why Jesus appeared first before Annas.

(1) Annas was a seasoned veteran in dealing with difficult cases. “This man would have been invaluable to Caiaphas in defining the arguments, formulating the charge, striking out irrelevant matters, and in short, quickly directing the litigation to the main issues. The old man’s advice would make the work of Caiaphas just so much easier.”

(2) Annas had a special hatred of Jesus and wanted to see Him in bonds under humiliation. The reasons for this hatred are found in our Lord’s teachings and actions. On two occasions (see Jn. 2:13-22, Mk. 11:15-19; Lk. 19:45-48; Mt. 21:10-13), the Savior cleansed the temple’s outer enclosure called “the Court of the Gentiles” of the money-changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals. Although people could bring their own animals to the temple to be sacrificed, long distances made this impractical for some and there was always the risk that the animals brought would not be approved by the priests. As a result, powerful priestly families such as Annas’ set up an animal selling business at the temple complex and sold these pre-approved animals at exorbitant prices. Further, at the temple complex foreign money was not accepted as payment. The ruling families also took advantage of this by setting up tables in the courtyard where money could be exchanged. The money-changers charged a fee and as a result the high priests were making enormous profits off of God’s people when they came to worship. Further, the areas where the Gentiles (the God-fearers) were permitted to pray were full of noise, filth and stench from animal manure.

When Christ entered the temple area he drove out all those who bought and sold, overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves and publicly rebuked the high priestly families for making the house of prayer into a den of thieves (Mt. 21:10-13). This was a stinging rebuke to Annas and His family. They took it as a personal insult and wanted revenge. Now with the Savior under arrest, Annas could gloat. In this unofficial setting, without the Sanhedrin, Annas, the power broker of the priesthood, could freely act the part of a Mafia boss to essentially communicate to Jesus: “How dare you challenge my authority? You are going to pay for what you have done.”

(3) A practical reason why our Lord was brought before Annas first was the simple fact that time was needed to gather together the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin (the supreme court of the Jews) was composed of seventy-one members. A late night session of the court (or at least a quorum) would take time to convene. The members would have to be found, awakened and then convinced that a night session of the court (which was illegal) was necessary. This task was left to the official high priest Caiaphas and his comrades.

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188 William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 388. Craig Evans writes, “[T]here is ample evidence that Jesus’ contemporaries were critical of the Jewish high priesthood and regarded it as corrupt in various ways. We find such evidence in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where the high priest is dubbed the ‘Wicked Priest’ (1 QP Hab. 1:13; 8:9; 9:9; 11:4-5), who has robbed the poor (1 QP Hab 8:12; 9:5; 10:1; 12:10), has amassed wealth (1 QP Hab 8:8-12; 9:4-5), and has defiled the ‘Sanctuary of God’ (1 QP Hab 12:8-9).” (*Mark 8:27-16:20, 165-166*).

189 Klaas Schilder, *Christ on Trial*, 19.
Annas’ Question

What occurred before Annas is very interesting for it reveals how the Jewish leadership regarded Jesus of Nazareth. “The high priest [Annas] then asked Jesus about His disciples and His doctrine” (Jn. 18:19). There are a number of things to note regarding this question.

(1) The approach of Annas reveals the unlawfulness of the procedure against our Lord. The Jewish leaders had an obligation to make a specific charge against Jesus and then summon at least two credible witnesses to prove it. “One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits, by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established” (Deut. 19:15). Instead of providing credible witnesses, Annas wanted Jesus to give them what they needed for the prosecution. Barclay writes, “One curious feature of legal procedure in the Sanhedrin was that the man involved was held to be absolutely innocent, and indeed, not even on trial, until the evidence of the witnesses had been stated and confirmed. The argument about the case could only begin when the testimony of the witnesses was given and confirmed. That is the point of the conversation between Jesus and Annas in John 18:19-21. Jesus in that incident was reminding Annas that he had no right to ask him anything until the evidence of witnesses had been taken and found to agree.”

(2) The question about His disciples and doctrine is likely rooted in Deuteronomy 13:1-10. Annas was attempting to illicit information regarding Christ being a false prophet. Deuteronomy 13 warns Israel regarding people who claim to be a prophet and are even able to work a sign or miracle, yet who entice the covenant people to serve other gods (vs. 1-2). It also warns against teachers who secretly entice the people to go astray (v. 6). The clear teaching of Scripture is that all such people must be put to death (vs. 5, 9, 10). Annas and the other Jewish leaders could not deny the miracles of the Savior for they were abundant, unmistakable and public. Therefore, they would admit that signs were occurring, but assert that the Nazarene was enticing the people away from the true God, even secretly enticing Jews into apostasy. The Jewish leaders were so convinced of the truth of their corrupt, apostate religious system that they were attempting to force their own Messiah into the mold of the false prophet of Deuteronomy 13. By asserting His own divinity and gathering His own disciples, Jesus (in their view) was turning Jews away from Jehovah to a false god—Himself. They believed He was a dangerous false prophet and thus was responsible for leading many Jews away from the true faith.

(3) It is clear from Annas’ line of questioning that the Jewish leadership at this crucial time, after the arrest of Christ, still did not know what crime they going to charge Him with. They were improvising as they were going along. It was obvious to everyone involved that the Savior could not be charged with any sort of immoral act, so the only alternative was to focus on His teaching. They had to find evidence of Him either being a false prophet, a blasphemer or both; and, they had to find something in His teaching that could be construed as sedition against Rome.

(4) A number of commentators think that the question regarding the disciples is designed to humiliate Jesus, for Annas was well aware that His followers had all fled. Annas in effect is saying, “Where are your brave followers? If these men were so loyal, then where are they? If these disciples really cared about You, then why are they not here to testify on your behalf?” Interestingly, when the Savior does answer Annas, He doesn’t speak one word about His disciples. Why does our Lord completely ignore this aspect of Annas’ question? One obvious

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reason is that Christ is not obligated to answer unlawful questions by a wicked judge on a fishing expedition. Spurgeon notes another excellent reason. He writes, “Why this silence? Because it is not for our Advocate to accuse his disciples. He might have answered, ‘Well dost thou ask, “Where are they?” the cowards forsook me; when one proved a traitor, the rest took to their heels. Thou sayest, “Where are my disciples?” There is one yonder, sitting by the fire, warming his hands; the same who just now denied me with an oath.’ But no, he would not utter a word of accusation; he whose lips are mighty to intercede for his people, will never speak against them. Let Satan slander, but Christ pleads. The accuser of the brethren is the prince of this world: the Prince of Peace is ever our Advocate before the eternal throne.”

Christ’s Response

Our Lord answers Annas in a calm, dignified manner, “I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said” (Jn. 18:20-21).

Jesus answers truthfully, boldly and perhaps even indignantly. In His answer He makes a number of points.

(1) The Savior emphatically (“With three emphatic ego Jesus states what he on his part has done”[192]) declares that His teaching was open and public to everyone. He preached the gospel to all Israel. That is, to everyone everywhere he went. He did not speak anything in “secret.” Our Lord is denying that He is involved in any subversive activity because subversives, insurrectionists, revolutionaries and other such malignants do not broadcast their teachings and activities in a public forum. Only wicked persons hide what they are doing and teach in secret.

He says in effect: I have never been a prophet “of the desert” or of the “inner closet.” To form a nucleus designed to work its way forcibly into the existing body of the church, state, and community by way of introducing an alien element into these, bent on eventually destroying them, is a law quite incompatible with the kingdom of heaven. I have done nothing, Christ means to say, other than to set free and to cause those seeds to sprout which God Himself had planted in the field of Israel. I have not planted two kinds of seeds, he asserts; I have introduced no germinal properties alien to the body of the people, but have under the full light of the sun wanted to cause the seeds, which the God of truth long ago planted in Israel’s soil, to germinate. Hence secret doctrines and esoteric organizations are none of mine. I come not to break down but to fulfill.[193]

Our Lord is saying to Annas that since He had taught openly in all the public places frequented by the Jews and had not taught secretly, there was no rational or biblical reason for Annas to be asking such a question. “The right way to go about things, now that an arrest has taken place and the law set in motion, was to bring out the witnesses and let them tell their story.”[194] In a way Christ is respectfully telling Annas that his question is absurd and unnecessary. “If everything that I taught was public and nothing whatsoever was hid, then if I taught heresy you don’t need My testimony for there should be hundreds of witnesses.” Further,

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193 Klaas Schilder, Christ on Trial, 35.
of what use would Jesus’ testimony be if He was a liar, devil and false prophet as the Jewish leaders supposed. Annas, in the presence of the Messiah, was clearly in over his head.

As we consider our Lord’s statement, keep in mind that He is not asserting that He never spoke to the apostles in private away from the multitudes. “What He means is that He did not have two kinds of teaching, a harmless one for the general public and a very different one for the secret revolutionaries.”195 When, for example, the Savior privately explained certain parables to His disciples, He was only clarifying public statements. He was not setting forth anything new or unique. The gospel of the kingdom was public. In fact, the teaching of the Messiah in Palestine would be proclaimed throughout the whole world on the direct orders of the resurrected King (Mt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15-18).

(2) Jesus also emphasizes that He preached in all the established places of public worship throughout Israel—the synagogues and the temple. That our Lord taught in the synagogues of Galilee is evident from the synoptic gospels (Mt. 4:23; 12:9; 13:54; Mk. 1:21, 39; Lk. 4:15, 16, 44) and John (e.g., 6:59). The gospel of John gives numerous instances where the Savior taught in the temple (e.g., 2:19; 7:14, 28; 8:20; 10:23; see Mk. 14:49). “The fact of His public teaching was notorious.”196 In Jerusalem He always went to the temple to teach. The reason for this was that He always sought the largest possible audience for His doctrine. This statement reinforces what our Lord said about the public nature of His teaching in a manner that emphasizes His use of God-ordained Jewish institutions. As if to say, “Not only was My doctrine set forth publicly and frequently in the visible church for over three years, but no one, whether an elder, teacher or church member has brought Me up on charges or demonstrated My teaching to be contrary to Scripture.

(3) Our Lord emphasizes and makes his point explicit by the question to Annas: “Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said” (Jn. 18:21). This statement is a direct challenge to Annas. “Why do you, the high priest, pretend to be ignorant of what is common knowledge of the people! You have had many opportunities to hear Me preach! You have expelled from the synagogue those who believe in Me.”197 Christ is essentially saying, “Let’s be honest here. Let’s not play games. The people know My teaching and so do you. If you are not sure about My doctrine, it would have been very easy to find out. Therefore, this arrest and interrogation is unnecessary and unlawful.” The Savior is telling Annas very plainly that He has absolutely no intention of testifying in this case or defending Himself under such circumstances. The Messiah who came to fulfill all righteousness will not and cannot cooperate in these unlawful and unjust proceedings. Christ is telling the high priest in no uncertain terms that he needs to obey the law of God. Having stated His reasons for not answering these questions, from this point on Jesus will say very little throughout the rest of the proceedings, both ecclesiastical and civil. “For the rest of the questioning our Lord Jesus said not a word in self-defense; he knew that it availed not for a lamb to plead with wolves; he was well-aware that whatever he said would be misconstrued and made a fresh source of accusation, and he willed, moreover, to fulfill prophecy, ‘He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.’”198

(4) By way of application, there are six things that these verses bring to mind. First, believers do not have a moral obligation to cooperate with a corrupt court or with unjust

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195 Ibid.
proceedings. With the majesty of the Son of God, our Lord asked for truth and justice. He was not evasive or dishonest. He asked the court to follow the biblical, lawful procedure for He had nothing to hide. Ryle writes, “The boldness and dignity of our Lord’s reply to Annas in this verse are very noteworthy. They are an example to all Christians of the courageous and unflinching tone which an innocent defendant may justly adopt before the bar of an unrighteous judge. ‘The righteous is bold as a lion.’”199

Second, Jesus made it very clear that the truth of the gospel ought to be preached by His servants indiscriminately to the world. Gospel messengers are debtors to all men, for they do not know upon whom the Lord may make their ministry successful. Further, the gospel preached is a testimony against those persons who refuse to repent. As Paul says, “For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

Third, Christ focused His attention upon the synagogues and the temple; that is, “where the Jews always meet” (Jn. 18:20). Even though our Lord lived in a degenerate and corrupt generation, He still frequented places of public worship for the advance of the gospel. In this we see His commitment to the covenant people and His dedication to publishing His doctrine in every corner of Palestine. He even “published his doctrine among his most cruel enemies, where no doubt, he prevailed with some, John xii. 42.”200 The Savior teaches us, by His example, that truth must be preached even where there are dangerous opponents and many disadvantages. Faithful ministers can always expect some kind of opposition and trials.

Fourth, in Annas, we see the dangers of apostate leaders in the church. “Whenever the church, explicitly or implicitly, departs from Christ and the holy and inscripturated Word of God, the Bible, it departs from the truth and attempts to put Christ and His true church on trial.”201 All apostate church leaders throughout history hate the Nazarene and His message. This was certainly true of the popes of Rome who frothed at the mouth like wild dogs against the great saints of God such as John Wycliffe, John Huss, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Like Annas they were deaf to the teachings of Christ. They bowed the knee to pomp, ritual, adornments, riches, power and, with hearts of stone, they opposed the gospel and murdered the saints. Like Annas, their trials were marked by injustice, deceit and treachery.

Fifth, in Annas and Christ we see a stark contrast between the failure of the old priesthood and the success of the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. The Old Testament high priest had the most privileged religious position among all Israel. Only he had the unique privilege of entering the Holy of Holies once a year to offer sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. “The high priest’s responsibilities included all the sacrificial activities that took place inside the temple, either with his direct involvement or under his supervision.”202 The priesthood was designed by God for the benefit of His people. Although everything connected with the priestly office was symbolical and typical, the underlying idea of the priesthood was easy to understand. The office focused on reconciliation to God through atoning sacrifice and mediation between a holy God and a sinful people. (“Even the Hebrew term for priest (Cohen) denotes in its root-

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meaning ‘one who stands up for another, and mediates in his cause.’”\(^{203}\) Another important aspect of the priesthood was their responsibility in dress, ritual and actions to show forth the holiness of Israel. The high priest was supposed to be the greatest embodiment of all that the priesthood represented. Yet, in the days of our Lord, the high priests were white-washed tombs and sons of Satan.

Annas is proof that the priesthood and the role of mediator could not be left in the hands of sinful men. What was needed was the Melchizedek priesthood of Christ. Jesus was both God and man in one person. Because He was without sin, He did not need to offer sacrifices for Himself as the Old Covenant priests did (Heb. 9:7-15). There was no danger of Him ever failing and corrupting His role as mediator. Unlike the self-serving, corrupt priests such as Annas and Caiaphas, “[t]he Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45). While Annas lived in luxury in his palace, the Savior was preaching the gospel to the poor. Unlike the wicked priests who had corrupted the doctrine of salvation, the Messiah was light and truth itself. The Old Testament priests had to make offerings over and over again both for themselves and the people. Annas and his comrades had taken advantage of this fact for profit. But Jesus who is holy, harmless and undefiled offered Himself once and for all (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 3:18). While Annas was using the people, instead of interceding on their behalf; Christ lives forever to intercede and care for His people (Heb. 7:25). It is fitting that Annas confronted the Savior, for he represents the old order abused, corrupted and perverted by man. God in His providence allows the Mediator of the new and better covenant to be led as captive into the presence of the leader of an apostate, corrupt, dying priesthood—a priesthood that bowed the knee to Rome instead of the Messiah.

Sixth, the doctrine of Christ may safely appeal to everyone in the world because it is objectively true, totally consistent with reality and perfectly rational. Of all the religions in the world only one has a genuine divine revelation that has never and will never be demonstrated to be false. Yes, it is true that men claim they can disprove it, yet their arguments are always based on false assumptions and the unsound use of logic. There is nothing secretive or esoteric regarding Christianity. It is a public doctrine that does not need the coercion of the sword as in Islam; a leap into the irrational such as eastern faiths; or, the brainwashing and mind control of the cults. If men do not believe it, it is not the fault of the gospel (which is flawless) but the blindness and partiality of the natural man.

The First Blow

Our Lord’s answer to Annas, with its brilliance, boldness, justice, courage, dignity and directness, was unexpected by those assembled in the high priest’s house. They were expecting Jesus to grovel in the dust before the might assembled against Him. One of the men who worked for Annas (a temple guard) was very displeased with our Lord’s answer and decided to strike Christ on the face. John writes, “And when He had said these things, one of the officers who stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, ‘Do you answer the high priest like that?’ Jesus answered him, ‘If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?’” (Jn. 18:22-23). This wicked underling was no doubt attempting to please Annas who wanted to see the Man that had overturned his money tables humiliated and punished for interfering with his operation. There are a number of things to note regarding this incident.

(1) This blow is an example of the natural man’s enmity toward God and hatred of the gospel. The temple guards had often heard Jesus teach in the temple. They were fully aware of His doctrine. They knew that the man standing before them, with his hands bound behind his back, was innocent. Our Lord’s answer to Annas, although bold and direct, was not insulting. It was calm, well-reasoned and just. The Savior’s answer most certainly did not deserve this cruel and cowardly blow. How can we account for this great injustice? How could a man strike the good Shepherd who was not only innocent but perfectly holy? The Bible tells us that the unregenerate man “hates the light” (Jn. 3:20); “suppresses the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18) and “is enmity against God” (Rom. 8:7). All who preach the gospel to the heathen can expect to be treated with contempt.

(2) This type of blow was considered by the Jews to be especially humiliating. The Greek word used (rapisma) in ancient Greek originally meant a “blow with a club (or rod).” Many of the older commentators, following the earliest meaning of this noun, find in this incident a fulfillment of Micah 5:1, “They shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek.” By the time of Jesus, however, it was usually used to describe a hand blow or slap to the face.204

It must have been especially humiliating to Jesus that the first blow came by the hand of a Jew. A Jew who was employed at the temple! Yes, the man whose calling was to protect the temple struck someone “greater than the temple” (Mt. 12:6). Isaiah speaks vividly of this blow and the ones to follow saying, “I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting” (50:6). “It was unjust to strike one that was confessedly a person of account; it was cowardly to strike one that had his hands tied; and barbarous to strike a prisoner at the bar.”205 J. C. Ryle writes,

We may learn from this circumstance what a low, degraded, and disorderly condition the Jewish courts of Ecclesiastical law must have been in at this period, when such a thing as publicly striking a prisoner could take place, and when violence could be shown to a prisoner in a full court of justice for answering boldly for himself. It supplies strong evidence of the miserably fallen state of the whole Jewish nation, when such an act could be done under the very eyes of a judge. Nothing is a surer index of the real condition of a nation than the conduct of its courts of justice, and its just or unjust treatment of prisoners. The scepter had clearly fallen from Judah, and rottenness was at the core of the nation, when the thing mentioned in this verse could happen. Our Lord’s assailant evidently held that a prisoner must never reply to his judge, however unjust or corrupt the judge might be.206

(3) We see in the conduct of this court that all tyrants rule by force and injustice, and not by truth and equity. When examined by papal bishops, the Protestants of old suffered under the rack, the boot, hot tongs and other tortures almost unthinkable. The saints’ only defense was truth in the heart and God’s Word on the tongue. The people who serve wicked, unjust rulers can only serve them on the basis of injustice and brute force. (The cases of Joseph, Daniel and

204 "The Greek literally says that the officer ‘gave a rhapisma to Jesus.’ The earliest meaning of this noun was ‘a blow with a club (or rod).’ But here it means ‘a slap in the face’” (Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament, 94). The Greek scholar, A. T. Robertson, takes a slightly different view: “Late word rapisma is from rapizo, to smite with a rod or with the palm of the hand (Matt. 26:67). It occurs only three times in the N. T. (Mark 14:65; John 18:22; 19:3), in each of which it is uncertain whether the blow is with a rod or with the palm of the hand (probably this, a most insulting act)” (Word Pictures in the New Testament, 5:288). See also Luke 22:63; 2 Corinthians 11:20.

205 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1180.

206 J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:266.
Mordecai are rare, providential, extraordinary, exceptions to the principle that “corrupt masters have ordinarily corrupt servants.” “If a ruler pays attention to lies, all his servants become wicked” (Prov. 29:12). “The blow on the cheek, as inflicted for a supposed offense, may be compared with 1 Kings xxvi. 24, where the false prophet Zedekiah smote the true prophet Micaiah.”

Satan’s kingdom is ruled by oppression, tyranny, terror, torture and murder. As Chairman Mao would often remind his followers, “Power flows from the barrel of a gun.” Throughout history, from Nero, to the papacy of Rome, to the prelatists of Charles II, to modern totalitarian states, we find a common thread of oppression against truth. For example, Lenin’s secret police (the Cheka) followed their corrupt leader by attempting to forge a paradise with barbarity, injustice, torture and death. “In Kharkhov the skin was peeled off victims’ hands to produce ‘gloves’ of human skin; in Voronezh naked prisoners were rolled around in barrels studded with nails, in Poltava priests were impaled; in Odessa captured White officers were tied to planks and fed slowly into furnaces; in Kiev cages of rats were fixed to prisoners’ bodies and heated until the rats gnawed their way in to the victims’ intestines.”

Most everyone is aware of the fiendish sadism of Stalin, Hitler, Polpot and Saddam Hussein. The Christian is free from such madness and brutality because the truth doesn’t need the torture chamber. It is unassailable. It stands on its own. The justice and equity of God’s law frees us from the tyranny of human autonomy, of men without God. People bow the knee to Christ out of love and respect not because they are forced to do so by black-booted thugs.

(4) There is an amazing contrast between the brutal behavior of the temple officer and the gentle, reasoned response of the Savior. When a person is struck in a very violent manner for no good reason whatsoever, the normal, immediate response is to become exceedingly angry. We see this response in Paul who under very similar circumstances replied to the high priest, “God will strike you, you white-washed wall” (Ac. 23:3). But where the greatest of apostles becomes almost unhinged, Christ answers the thug’s attack with a perfect calm. “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?” (Jn. 18:23). Jesus is saying, “If I have spoken in a wicked, unlawful manner, then act as a proper witness in a court and set forth your evidence; but if I have spoken nothing contrary to the law of God, then on what legal basis do you strike Me?” Interestingly, according to Deuteronomy a man can only be beaten lawfully after the determination of the court (i.e. after the judges render their verdict, Dt. 25:1-2). And, the man is only to be beaten after the judge asks him to lie down (Dt. 25:2). This implies that the man is to be beaten only on the back and not on the face. Once again we see the lawlessness of the leaders in Israel.

The response of our Lord to this blow often raises a question as to whether Jesus is obeying His own injunction in Matthew 5:39 to turn the other cheek. The answer to this question
is that the turning of the cheek and the holding of the tongue are two differing things. Luther writes,

You are to understand that a great difference exists between these two: holding out the other cheek and rebuking with words the one who strikes us. Christ is to suffer, and yet the word is placed into his mouth that he is to speak and to reprove what is wrong. Therefore I am to distinguish between the mouth and the hand. The mouth I am not to yield to condone the wrong; but the hand I am to hold still not to avenge myself. We are not only to allow ourselves to be struck on the cheek, but are to allow ourselves to be burned for the sake of the truth. But that I should say to the judge, “Dear judge, you are certainly doing right to burn me,” this would be to betray and to deny Christ as well as that for which I die…. For why should I bid knaves and ruffians do injustice? Why should I say to the thief, “Sir come and steal my coat”? Christ does not ask this, but Christ says, “Whoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.” This means to say, “if one wills to smite thee, do not resist, do not take revenge, do not repay evil with evil.”

Chapter 5: The Ecclesiastical Trial of Jesus—Before the Sanhedrin

And they led Jesus away to the high priest: and with him were assembled all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes…. And the chief priests and all the council sought for witness against Jesus to put him to death: and found none. For many bare false witness against him, but their witness agreed not together. And there arose certain, and bare false witness against him, saying, “We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.” But neither so did their witness agree together. And the high priest stood up in the midst, and asked Jesus, saying, “Answerest thou nothing? What is it which these witness against thee?” But he held his peace, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him, and said unto him, “Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest rent his clothes, and said, “What need we any further witnesses? Ye have heard the blasphemy: what think ye?” And they all condemned him to be guilty of death. And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to buffet him, and to say unto him, prophesy: and the servants did strike him with the palms of their hands (Mk. 14:53, 55-65; read Mt. 26:57, 59-68; Lk. 22:54, 63-63; Jn. 18:24).

Introduction

After the meeting with Annas (which produced no useful material for a prosecution) our Lord is taken in bonds (Jn. 18:24) to the house of Caiaphas. “His ability as a diplomat and an administrator is suggested by his tenor of office over a period of nineteen years (A.D. 18-37) in an era when the average term of office was only four years.” Caiaphas, however, was every bit as wicked and corrupt as his father-in-law Annas.

At the high priest’s house all the chief priests, elders and scribes were present. The “all” in this passage is probably not meant to be taken literally, but in the sense that many were present to form a quorum of the court. It is unlikely that Joseph of Arimathea was present; for as

211 Martin Luther as quoted in R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel, 1203.
a secret follower of Christ, he would not have condemned Jesus to be put to death (see Mk. 15:64 where the account says that all condemned Him to be guilty of death).

The Sanhedrin was assembled in a large upper room on the second floor of the palace (Mk. 14:66 says “Peter was below in the courtyard.”). This meeting is very important, for it is at this assembly that the Sanhedrin develops their unjust case against Jesus. As we examine this trial or preliminary investigation there are a number of questions that we need to ask: (1) What is the Sanhedrin? (2) Was this a legal trial? (3) On what basis was Christ convicted? (4) What is significant regarding the beating of the Savior? (5) What are some important applications that can be derived from our text?

The Sanhedrin

The term “Sanhedrin” is an English transliteration of the Greek word sunedrion which is taken directly from the Hebrew or Aramaic term sanedrin. Regarding the meaning of this word, D. A. Hagner writes,

The Gr. Word sunedrion frequently encountered in Classical and Hellenistic Gr. where it commonly means “place of gathering,” but also comes to connote the gathering itself and in some instances even its authority. The word occurs also in the LXX where it refers to an assembly or court (but not to the Sanhedrin as commonly understood). While sunedrion is common in the NT (over twenty occurrences) and in Josephus, it is not the only term or phrase used in referring to the great council of Jerusalem. The term gerousia, “senate,” is found occasionally in the OT Apocrypha and Josephus, and occurs once also in the N. T. (Acts 5:21). Another word used to refer to the Sanhedrin is presbuterion, “council of elders,” which is used twice in the NT (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5). A word used often by Josephus in referring to the Sanhedrin is Boule. While this particular word is not used by NT writers, the cognate noun Bouleutes, “councilor” is used by Luke (23:50) in reference to Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin. The noun Bouleuterion, “council,” also is used by Josephus. The council is often referred to in the NT by speaking of its members using one, or a conjoining of more than one, of the following: arxiereis, “chief priests”; grammateris; “scribes”; presbuteroi, “elders.”

The precursor of the Sanhedrin was the judges and officers which judged the people in the gates (Deut. 16:19). Every town and village would have its own legal authorities to deal with common, ordinary cases. If, however, there were difficult cases, they would be referred to a higher court, a central tribunal. Deuteronomy 17:8-9 reads, “If a matter arises which is too hard for you [i.e. local town judges] to judge, between degrees of guilt for bloodshed, between one judgment or another, or between one punishment or another, matters of controversy within your gates, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God chooses, and you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge there in those days, and inquire of them; they shall pronounce upon you the sentence of judgment.” “The representatives of the local court

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213 “Tradition placed the founding of the Great Sanhedrin in the wilderness under Moses, for Numbers 11:16-17 records God’s instructions to Moses to gather together ‘seventy of Israel’s elders’ to perform judicial functions. These seventy plus Moses would have been seventy-one…. The Sanhedrin was organized traditionally into three chambers—a chamber of 23 priests, a chamber of 23 scribes, and a chamber of 23 elders—though often this was not strictly followed. To these, two presiding officers were added making a total of seventy-one” (James Montgomery Boice, The Gospel of John, 5:1387).

were bound to act upon the ruling of the central tribunal, whether or not they found it congenial. In this way, there was a central legal authority in Israel, with the power to resolve legal problems and conflicts.”

Several centuries after Moses, in the reign of Jehoshaphat (King of Judah, 872-848 B.C.), we read about the revival of the supreme court:

Moreover in Jerusalem, for the judgment of the Lord and for controversies, Jehoshaphat appointed some of the Levites and priests, and some of the chief fathers of Israel, when they returned to Jerusalem. And he commanded them, saying, "Thus you shall act in the fear of the Lord, faithfully and with a loyal heart: Whatever case comes to you from your brethren who dwell in their cities, whether of bloodshed or offenses against law or commandment, against statutes or ordinances, you shall warn them, lest they trespass against the Lord and wrath come upon you and your brethren. Do this, and you will not be guilty. And take notice: Amariah the chief priest is over you in all matters of the Lord; and Zebadiah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, for all the king's matters; also the Levites will be officials before you. Behave courageously, and the Lord will be with the good" (2 Chronicles 19:8-11).

This supreme court of the nation consisted of eminent religious leaders who were very knowledgeable in the law and experienced in wisdom or the law’s application. There were also secular elders who by their age and experience were competent in dealing with difficult cases. The chief priest Amariah was to preside over cultic ceremonial matters while Zebadiah the prime minister presided over political matters. After the Exile (c. 538 B.C.) the elders of the Jews (Ezek. 5:5 ff.; 10:8), the nobles and officials (Neh. 2:16) were still active in the governance of the people.

By the time Jesus was born there were a number of factors that led to the corruption of this supreme council. First, there was the outside influence of the Romans. Herod, for example, had killed members of the Sanhedrin who challenged his wicked behavior. He also filled the supreme court with men who were willing to cooperate with his corrupt manner of conducting business. Under the Romans the Sanhedrin more or less adopted a form of political pragmatism to get along with their Roman overlords. In A.D. 6 Judea was made a Roman province. Under this political situation the Sanhedrin and the high priest were “granted almost exclusive control of the internal affairs of the nation…and, so long as public order was maintained and tax revenues were forthcoming, they were content for national matters to be under the control of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin.” The Sanhedrin had great power, but they were always ultimately answerable to the Roman governor. As noted above, the Sanhedrin’s desire to appease the Romans plays a strong factor in the decision to kill Jesus and in their arguments to Pontius Pilate (e.g., “And they began to accuse Him, saying, ‘We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King’” [Lk. 23:2; see 23:5]).

Second, the Sanhedrin functioned during a time of widespread religious apostasy, in which they played a leading role. Aside from Nicodemus (Jn. 3) and Joseph of Arimathea, who were disciples of Jesus secretly (Jn. 19:38), there is no evidence that the Jewish leaders ever demonstrated any interest in Christ other than as a possible competitor. At the amazing birth of the Savior, of which the leaders in Jerusalem were well aware (Mt. 2:1ff.), only shepherds came

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216 D. A. Hagner, 5:270.
to worship Him (Lk. 2:20). The teaching, miracles, signs and good works of the Savior were either ignored or maligned. Jesus appeared before a court consisting of hardened unbelievers.

Was the Trial Legal?

As we consider the legality of our Lord’s trial, we want to examine this question from two perspectives. First, we want to know whether the Sanhedrin self-consciously violated their own laws regarding capital trials at that time. Second, we want to understand if and how biblical justice was violated.

Regarding Jewish law, an analysis of the gospels reveals that the Sanhedrin violated virtually every single law associated with a capital case. According to the rules set out in the Mishnah tractate Sanhedrin: a) “No trial for life was allowed during the night. Yet, Jesus was tried and condemned during the hours of 1:00-3:00am Friday and executed on the feast, which was forbidden. According to Pharisaic law, no hearings in a case involving capital punishment could even be initiated on the eve of a major festival like Passover. No conviction was allowed at night. To execute a sentence on the day of one of the great feasts was contrary to the established regulations. b) The arrest of Jesus happened as a result of a bribe, namely, the blood-money which Judas received. c) Jesus was asked to incriminate himself. d) In cases of capital punishment, Jewish law did not permit the sentence to be pronounced until the day after the accused had been convicted.”

e) According to the Mishnah, the Sanhedrin was supposed to meet in the temple complex in what was called “The Chamber of Hewn Stone.” The supreme court, however, met in the private residence of Caiaphas. f) The hearing was to begin not with questions to the defendant, but with a presentation of the defense. In fact, the members of the Sanhedrin “were allowed to speak on behalf of the person on trial but not against him.”

g) “When evidence was taken, witnesses were examined separately and their evidence to be valid must agree in every detail.” Further, arresting a man and then going out to find people to testify against him was a flagrant injustice.

Various attempts have been made by scholars to refute or at least temper the accusation that virtually every aspect of the trial was unlawful. Perhaps the best objection is that it is

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217 William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 926. In a similar vein D. A. Hagner writes, “The Sanhedrin, like other local courts according to the Mishnah, almost certainly was prohibited from meeting on the Sabbath or on feast days. Whether it could in extreme circumstances legally meet on a feast day as it did in the trial of Jesus cannot be known, but seems improbable. In cases involving capital punishment, the sentence could not lawfully be delivered until the day following the trial, and therefore such trials were also prohibited on the eve of either a Sabbath or a feast day (San 4:1). Cases involving potential capital punishment were similarly barred from taking place at night (San 4:1). According to Tosephta (San 7:1), the hours of meeting on regular days were from the time of the morning sacrifice to the evening sacrifice” (“Sanhedrin,” 5:271).

218 R. T. France notes that if the Chamber of Hewn Stone was unavailable there were two other specified official places to meet. These alternative sites did not include the house of Caiaphas (see *The Gospel of Mark*, 601).


221 James Montgomery Boice writes, “The trial was also illegal because it was conducted within the space of one day. We remember that according to Jewish law there were actually to be two trials. On the first day, the entire case was to be heard and the first of two votes was taken. If the accused was found innocent, the trial ended at that point. If he was found guilty, the trial was suspended for the night while the judges reconsidered the evidence and tried to find some way by which the accused (and now condemned) man might be exonerated. Only after a night like this did they return to the judgment hall and retry the case. Every attempt was made to secure acquittal. It was only in the afternoon of this second day that a second vote was taken after which, if the vote was still for condemnation, execution followed.” (*The Gospel of John*, 5:1401)
impossible to be sure how far the provisions codified in the Mishnah (c. A.D. 200) were in effect at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus, approximately one hundred and sixty years before they were compiled. The Mishnah is a compilation of rabbinical oral traditions that date from around 200 B.C. until around A.D. 200. The Mishnah was compiled primarily by Rabbi Judah (“HaNasi” or the “Prince”) along with other Jewish scholars around A.D. 189. Because most of what was written down at the time came by way of oral tradition, no one is sure how much the Mishnah accurately reflects Jewish traditions. Edersheim writes, “It has already been hinted more than once that the law laid down in the Mishnah frequently represents the theories and speculations of the Jewish doctors of the second century A.D., and not the actual practice of any given period. Several of their regulations deal accordingly with obsolete customs, and have little regard to the actual circumstance of the time.”

While the Mishnah can certainly shed some light on Jewish practices of the first century, it must only be used in a definitive sense when it can be confirmed by the infallible, sacred Scriptures.

Another objection is that perhaps the events that took place at Caiaphas’ house were not a formal trial, but merely a continuation of the preliminary hearing before Annas. The fact that it was late at night, at a private house indicates that in order to bend the rules the Jewish leaders simply declared this gathering an “unofficial” meeting. They considered this event extraordinary because: Judas’ initial contact was unexpected; the secret conspiracy became public at the holy supper; the opportunity to arrest the Savior in secret may soon pass; and, “the Jewish authorities were extremely eager to be rid of Jesus immediately—before the climax of the holy feast of Passover—and thus no doubt they found this opportunity impossible to resist.” Further, “there was later rabbinic provision for ‘irregularities for emergencies and protection of the Torah,’ [so] it would [according to their system] probably also have been permissible at the time of Jesus for the Sanhedrin to have proceeded irregularly in a case which they treated as ‘an emergency fraught with danger to the Torah.’”

What all this means is that even though from the standpoint of the Mishnah every aspect of our Lord’s trial was an illegal farce, the Jews had built-in loopholes in their law system that allowed them to pragmatically circumvent their own concepts of justice. Although some scholars attempt to excuse the Sanhedrin by pointing out their pragmatism and flexibility, they in reality are demonstrating that the Jews were even more evil and damnable in their actions. Not only were their actions unjust and corrupt, but the law system which under-girded and justified these actions was also corrupt. “The hair-splitting casuistry of rabbinic law had discovered all kinds of ways to circumvent its own regulations. All Caiaphas had to do was to say that the trial of Jesus at this time and under these conditions was in the interest of the people and of religion.” The bottom line is that the Jews wanted Christ dead and they were willing to do whatever it took, lawful or not, to get the job done. All the attempts to justify their actions on that night were arbitrary and inconsistent with Scripture.

Although there is no way to know how much the Mishnah reflects the actual practice of the Jews in the days of Christ, there is no question regarding the Sanhedrin’s violation of biblical principles. This point can be proven by the following. First, God’s law required the administration of justice to take place in a public area during normal business hours. Barabas writes, “It was at the gate that the elders of the city sat for the administration of justice. The

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Mosaic law directed that rebellious sons be brought before the elders of the city at the gate (Deut. 21:19). The manslayer had an opportunity to present his cause before the elders of the city at the gate entering the city of refuge at the entering in of the gate (Josh. 20:4). Boaz consulted the elders of Bethlehem at the gate concerning Ruth’s property (Ruth 4:1). It was at the gate that kings sat to meet with their subjects and made legal decisions.” Biblical justice is a very public affair. Indeed, why would it be otherwise; just proceedings are not afraid of the light of day or public scrutiny. The trial of the Savior late at night has all the characteristics of a hearing in a totalitarian state.

Second, Jesus was arrested and bound before there were two or three independent witnesses. “And the chief priests and all the council sought for witnesses against Jesus to put him to death; and found none. For many bare false witness against him, but their witness agreed not together” (Mk. 14:55-56; cf. Mt. 26:59-60). Jewish courts did not have formal prosecutors. The case for the prosecution had to be made on the basis of eye-witness testimony. In the scene before us we have a court in search of a charge instead of judges dispassionately weighing the evidence of independent witnesses. The judges send out servants to scour the neighborhood for witnesses who with certain incentives and perhaps some coaching can condemn the words of the Savior. This ecclesiastical court has one major problem. Men who lie cannot get their stories straight. Normally, Jewish rules regarding the assessing of evidence were strict and fair toward the accusers; but here all semblance of legality has been cast aside.

Third, in a Hebrew court there must be at least two accusers and the accusers’ testimony must agree in every detail. There is a sense in which the accusers themselves are on trial before the arrest is even made. The witnesses are in essence the only prosecutors. If the testimony of the witnesses disagrees in any of the particulars, the testimony could not be accepted. During the trial the witnesses would again present their case (this time with the accused under arrest). If the testimony of the witnesses varied from each other or earlier testimony under a cross examination, the case would immediately be declared invalid. The biblical standards of justice in court cases are very strict; they strongly put the burden of proof on the prosecution. Further, the biblical penalty for being a false witness was to be punished in the same manner as the accused would have been if he had been convicted. Deuteronomy 19:16-20 says,

If a false witness rise up against any man to testify against him that which is wrong: Then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges, which shall be in those days; And the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you. And those which remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you.

The Sanhedrin had taken the best legal system in the world and turned it into a kangaroo court, an instrument of injustice. They twisted the law in order to murder Jesus Christ. The place of justice had become a place of supreme wickedness. “In the annals of jurisprudence no travesty of justice ever took place that was more shocking than this one.”

227 “Since in Jewish judicial procedure the witnesses functioned as the prosecution, they gave their evidence individually and verbally in the presence of the judges and the accused. If their respective dispositions differed one from another even in trivial details, they were inadmissible as evidence” (William L. Lane, The Gospel of Mark, 533. Lane’s source is B. Cohen, “Evidence in Jewish Law,” Recueils de la Societe J. Bodin 16 [1965], 103-115).
The gospels place the chief blame for the death of Jesus squarely upon the chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin. The leaders plotted the Savior’s death (Jn. 11:53); received special pronouncements of judgment from Christ in Matthew 23; were instrumental in leading the masses astray (Mt. 23:13-15); were the first to shout “Crucify Him, crucify Him” (Jn. 19:6) when our Lord appeared before Pilate; and, they pressured Pilate to kill the Savior when Pilate sought to release Him (Jn. 19:12). [When] “Pilate said to them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but Caesar!’” (Jn. 19:15). The unbelieving Jews who lived at that time were also responsible. “And all the people answered and said, ‘His blood be on us and our children’” (Mt. 27:25). Peter told the Jews in Jerusalem who were assembled for Pentecost: “You…asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the prince of life” (Ac. 3:14-15). The people, however, acted on the counsel of their religious and political leaders. “But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus” (Mt. 27:20).

Does the fact that the testimony of Scripture regarding the Jewish leadership and covenant people’s involvement in the death of Christ justify the virulent anti-Semitism that is found throughout the Middle Ages, the twentieth century and even today? No. The hatred of Jews is unjustified and unbiblical for a number of reasons.

First, the Bible is not anti-Jewish, but anti-unbelief. There were many Jews against Christ and some Jews who lovingly followed the Savior. Paul makes this point in Romans: “Has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham” (Rom. 11:1). The apostle warns the Gentiles against pride saying: “‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he may not spare you either” (Rom. 11:19-21). If it were not for the grace of God, everyone, irregardless of race or ethnicity, would have gladly participated in the murder of God’s Son. For apart from an interior work of the Holy Spirit, we by nature hate God (Rom. 8:7), are His enemies (Rom. 5:10) and would do everything we could to push Him out of our lives (Rom. 1:18-32). It is incredibly arrogant, stupid and unbiblical for white Europeans or anyone else to think of themselves as intrinsically superior to Jews. The crucial issue for everyone, whether a Jew of Gentile, is: Do you believe in Christ?

Second, the generation of unbelieving Jews that was directly responsible for the death of Christ was judged by God for their actions. “For you, brethren, become imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost” (1 Th. 2:14-16). God destroyed the wicked generation who murdered the Messiah in A.D. 70 when the Romans crushed Israel and destroyed the temple. Modern Jews are no more responsible for the death of Jesus than are Germans, born in America long after World War II, responsible for the horrors of Auschwitz.

Third, the Gentiles as well as the Jews were responsible for the death of Christ. When Peter and John were persecuted by the Sanhedrin, the Jerusalem church looked to God in prayer and applied Psalm 2 directly to the Savior and then said, “For truly against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done” (Ac. 4:27-28). God, according to His divine plan, permitted Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles
and the Jews to bring His Son to trial and to kill Him. Pilate sentenced Jesus to death (Lk. 23:23) and turned the Savior over to be tortured and crucified by Roman soldiers (Mt. 27:26; Jn. 18:16; Mk. 15:15). The guilt of putting the Son of God to death is assigned not to the Jews alone, but also the Gentiles. (Note that Scripture assumes a complete compatibility between God’s absolute sovereignty and man’s full responsibility).

Fourth, there is a sense in which all true Christians are responsible for the death of Jesus for He was condemned, tortured and nailed to the cross to eliminate the guilt and penalty of our sins. (This, of course, does not mean that we plotted His death and directly participated in it.) The Savior had to die as an atoning sacrifice if we were to be saved from sin, death and hell.

Over against the view of Scripture, there have been statements by Roman Catholic leaders, modernist scholars and Jewish groups exculpating the Jews in Jesus’ day from their responsibility for the death of Christ. While the motives for these declarations may appear noble (It seems that Romanists, Christian liberals and many Jews believe that the Jewish responsibility for the death of Christ must be denied to eliminate anti-Semitism.), they in reality do much more harm to people than good for all of these denials are rooted in an implicit or explicit rejection of the veracity of Scripture. If the biblical testimony regarding the Jewish role in the conspiracy, arrest, trial and murder of the Messiah is unreliable, then the gospel itself can be called into question. We can only love the Jews biblically if we preach the whole counsel of God to them; yes, even the fact that the blessed Messiah was rejected and condemned by His own people. The truth is often painful; but, only the truth regarding the Savior can set both Jews and Gentiles free from sin.

The Basis of the Conviction

At the inquiry before the Sanhedrin, the high priest took two different approaches. The first was an attempt to convict the Savior of being a serious threat to the safety and sanctity of the temple. This required false witnesses. This tactic (which will be analyzed in a moment) failed because the witnesses’ stories were not in agreement. The witnesses’ poor testimony was an embarrassment to the conspirators. The second approach used to procure a conviction was to ask Jesus directly if He was the Messiah, the Son of God. If Christ answered in the affirmative, then the court could accuse the Savior of blasphemy (a death penalty offense) and they could tell Pilate that our Lord’s claim to be a king was an act of treason before Caesar. They could use this admission to press Pilate on the necessity of the death penalty. Whether Caiaphas’ question to Jesus was premeditated or a spur of the moment act of desperation we have no way of knowing. We do know, however, that our Lord’s claim, teachings and miracles were driving Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders mad with envy and hatred. Let us turn our attention to these two tactics.

According to both Mark and Matthew’s account, after a number of false witnesses failed to make a viable case against the Savior, two came forward (Mt. 26:61; Mk. 14:57 says that certain men stood up) whose stories were similar enough to make an accusation as a pair. One man alleged, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days’” (Mt. 26:61). The other testified, “We heard Him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands’” (Mk. 14:58). There are a number of things to note regarding this testimony.
The accusation that our Lord was going to destroy the temple was a serious one. To the Jews, the destruction of their Temple would be akin to an American watching the destruction of the White House, Capitol Building, Supreme Court, Pentagon and several places of worship all at once. “The seriousness of such a charge may be judged by remembering the experience of Jeremiah, who barely escaped with his life when accused of predicting the temple’s destruction, and of Uriah, who did not escape (Jer. 26:7-24).” The accusation was utterly serious, for throughout the Graeco-Roman world the destruction or desecration of places of worship was regarded as a capital offense. The mere threat of violence against the Temple might well seem to the Sanhedrin a crime meriting the death penalty (cf. Tos. Sanhedrin xiii. 5; Rosh-Ha-Shanah 17 a; TJ Berachoth ix. 13b).

Our Lord’s statement about the destruction of His temple or body was widely misunderstood and was no doubt a sore point with many Jews. When Christ hung on the cross the people mocked Him saying, “You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself and come down from the cross!” (Mk. 15:29-30; cf. Mt. 27:40). Even at the persecution and murder of Stephen the Jewish people were still railing against the Lord’s statement regarding His temple. “They also set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us’ (Ac. 6:13-14). If the Savior had said, “I will destroy the temple (i.e. the building),” He would have been setting Himself above the true Old Covenant religion and that statement could have been interpreted as blasphemous. However, as we shall see in a moment, he said no such thing. Given the argument of the two witnesses at Christ’s trial, the mocking statements at the cross and the statements at the trial of Stephen, it is very likely that the Jewish leadership fanned the flames of hatred among the people by capitalizing on the people’s misunderstanding of what Jesus said. They took an innocent statement about the Savior’s death and resurrection (cf. Jn. 2:19-21) and twisted it into a direct challenge to the Jewish religion.

There is a contradiction in the testimony of these two witnesses. One man testified that Jesus said “I am able to destroy the Temple” while the other witness testified that our Lord said “I will destroy the Temple” (Mk. 14:58). There is a great deal of difference between a man who claims he is able to do something and a person who says he is definitely going to do it. The words “I am able to destroy” may be interpreted as a veiled threat or as the ranting of a mad man. The statement “I will destroy” is an emphatic promise of a revolutionary act, an act of sacrilege or desecration. Calvin notes “that the appellation of false witnesses is applied not to those who contrive a lie which had no foundation, but to those who calumniously pervert what was justly said, and turn it into a crime.”

If the judges in the Sanhedrin were doing their duty according to the law, the discrepancies between the two witnesses would have been noted and sharply questioned. But, in

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229 “Note that naos is the central building in the temple area which contains the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place; the ieron (usually translated ‘Temple’) is the entire temple complex with its courts as well as its structures” (R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel, 659).


232 “But a charge of speaking ‘against’ the Temple could not be fastened on him; had such a charge been proved it would have been constructive blasphemy in Jewish law and would also have been an offense in Roman law…” (F. F. Bruce, New Testament History [New York: Doubleday, 1969], 197).

their hatred and fury, these men press on as if the testimony were harmonious in every detail. That the testimony was inadequate is proven in two ways. First, Mark’s account says plainly, “But not even then did their testimony agree” (14:59). Second, the priest responds to this testimony in a manner that clearly indicates that he does not regard it as adequate for a conviction. “And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, ‘Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?’” (Mk. 14:60). The high priest took the matter into his own hands by asking a question that the law forbade. The witnesses should have been examined, not Jesus. Caiphas was impatient and desperate.

(3) The testimony is false because it does not reflect the words or meaning of what Christ actually said. The testimony is likely based on what our Lord said in John 2: “So the Jews answered and said to Him, ‘What sign do You show to us, since you do these things?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’” Then the Jews said, ‘It has taken forty six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?’” (vs. 18-20). The testimony against our Lord is inaccurate in a number of ways.

First, the Savior never said, “I am able to destroy this temple” or “I will destroy the temple;” but, “Destroy this temple.” That is, “if you destroy this temple.” “The imperative here seems equivalent to a conditional, ‘If you destroy…I will raise up.’”234 The ones causing the destruction are the enemies of the Savior. The answer of the Jews indicates that the audience who heard Jesus’ statement did not believe that He was claiming to be able to destroy or actually meaning to destroy the temple for they only asked about His ability to raise up the temple in three days.

Second, Christ was not referring to the temple building at all, but rather to His body. John says, “But He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said” (2:21-22). After our Lord cleansed the temple, the Jews asked for a sign to show by what authority He did such things. The Savior responded in an enigmatic manner that if the Jews killed Him He would rise from the dead. The resurrection is the ultimate sign of Christ’s authenticity, calling, authority and acceptance before the Father.

The physical absurdity of rebuilding the temple in such a short space of time should have alerted Jesus’ audience that His words were not meant to be taken literally.235 Perhaps the people were influenced by “some Jewish traditions in which the eschatological Messiah is expected to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem. This expectation may be rooted in the prophecy of Zech. 6:12: ‘The man whose name is Branch…he shall build the temple of the LORD’ (cf. Tg. [Targum] Zech. 6:12: ‘Behold, the man whose name is Messiah will be revealed, and he shall raise up, and shall build the Temple of the Lord’).… [Also] The men of Qumran apparently looked for a new, eschatological temple.”236 In the New Testament we learn that the Savior’s resurrection does lead to a new temple—the church of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:16, 17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21).

Third, our Lord never made a contrast between “the temple that is made with hands” and “another that is made without hands.” He never used such modifiers and, as noted, He was not speaking about the temple building, but about His own body. The two witnesses were attempting to make Jesus out to be, at the very least, a defamer of the central sanctuary and, at the most, a

235 “The aorist imperative to express the one decisive act is followed by the future indicative which is also punctiliar, the second action being contingent on the first” (R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel, 215).
236 Craig Evans, Mark, 8:27-16:20, 445.
mad revolutionary. But their accounts of what occurred were so garbled and contrary to one another that their testimony was useless to the Sanhedrin.

Interestingly, the false testimony of these men indicates that the Jews who were not Christ’s disciples had a general knowledge of the Savior’s teachings, but did not understand it nor did they pay close attention to the details. This situation is a fitting description of many people today who live in countries that were once largely Christian; they have a vague understanding of Christ, yet have not bothered to learn the particulars. Many people are too busy for the Savior. Therefore, they go about their daily business with no interest in Him. They don’t read their Bibles, pray or go to church. Or, they go to churches that, for the most part, ignore the Bible and true doctrine. True disciples of the Messiah have a completely different attitude toward Jesus. They want to know everything about Him. They arrange the affairs of life to spend time studying Him, praying to Him and worshipping Him. They want to know all the intimate details of the gospel. The false witnesses at Jesus’ trial demonstrate that people who do not concern themselves with the Savior; who do not bother learning the details of true doctrine; who do not demonstrate faith in the Master by their behavior are enemies of Christ. Such people’s lives will end up in the dust bin of history and, even worse, their bodies and souls will be cast in hell where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched (Mk. 9:43-48).

Fourth, even if the Jews had accurately quoted our Lord’s words, “Destroy this temple,” but had given them a wrong, malevolent meaning, they still would have not had a sufficient foundation to prove a capital offense. “A person might make use of those words a thousand times over—he might be very foolish, but he would not be guilty of death for such an offense. But where men have made up their minds to hate Christ, they will hate him without a cause. Oh! You that are adversaries of Christ… I know you try to invent some excuse for your opposition to his holy religion; you forge a hundred falsehoods; but you know that your witness is not true, and your trial in conscience through which you pass the Saviour, is but a mock one.”

People with dark hearts of stone who are confronted with the reality of Christ and His gospel always seek out false witnesses to slay the truth. There is the adoption of Darwinian macro-evolution by scientists, modernists, universities and so forth which is one of the most absurd, irrational theories ever conceived. People love it because it denies the Word of God and the Creator-creature distinction. There is the crackpot fiction of The Da Vinci Code, the Gnostic Gospel of Judas and other such rubbish which people love because they can deny the real Christ and continue to live in their sins. There are the speculations of Kant, Hegel and Marx. When people can’t stand the truth they take comfort in fantasies. In the brightness of the light of Christ they scurry into dark cracks and crevices like cockroaches. When people put Jesus on trial they can only condemn Him with lies. That is why everyone who flees the reality of the Savior must embrace an irrational, fallacious worldview.

(4) The insufficiency of these witnesses is exhibited in the high priest’s response. “And the high priest stood in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, ‘Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?’” (Mk. 14:60; Mt. 26:62). The high priest, who could not tolerate the calm, confident silence of Christ, challenges our Lord to respond to the witnesses’ allegations. No doubt the council was frustrated by the poor quality of their witnesses and the silence of the Savior, which deprived the court of any opportunity to exploit the accusations. Caiaphas arose, stepped into the middle of the assembly to face Jesus and rhetorically challenged the silence as if the refusal to respond implies guilt in some way. Then he asked a direct question which demanded a response. The high priest in essence was saying: “Aren’t you going to defend

you yourself against these serious charges? Tell me what these men are testifying against You?” “The first question is a challenge, even a dare. The second question is a demand. The high priest’s strategy is plain enough: if the testimony that has been given thus far fails to incriminate Jesus, perhaps His replies to it will.”

Our Lord did not respond to these questions, but remained perfectly silent. “But He kept silent and answered nothing” (Mk. 14:61; Mt. 26:63). He held His peace for a number of reasons. First, the trial was illegal and there was no need to answer false witnesses. Caiaphas knew “that those witnesses had been procured by fraud: but this is the way in which wicked men, when they find themselves in the possession of authority and power, throw off shame, and indulge in arrogance.” Jesus had no intention of dignifying the false testimony with a response. “And thus, in the majesty of His bearing He entered, as it were, His protest against the high priest’s violation of the principle of justice. It was no part of the duty of a ‘panel’ at the bar to clear up conflicting testimonies against himself, in order to assist prejudging judges to effect a conviction.”

“Innocence and dignity could make no other reply. Then this was a loud silence that literally spoke volumes. As it grew and grew in the ears of all present it fairly shouted that the whole proceeding, plus this last act of Caiaphas’, was absolutely illegal, and no more upsetting conviction of this travesty of a just court could be borne in upon the minds of this court.”

When men commit themselves to wickedness, there is nothing more piercing to the heart than silence for silence weighs heavy upon a guilty heart and conscience.

Second, the Savior was again fulfilling prophecy—“He opened not His mouth” (Isa. 53:7; cf. 42:1-4). Third, Christ did not defend Himself and seek an acquittal because He knew His hour had come and was determined to go to Golgotha. “Jesus bore Himself with the majesty of the Son of God, Who knew all that was before Him, and passed through it as on the way to the accomplishment of His mission.”

Our Lord’s silence at this moment of supreme injustice and slander sets before us an example of patience when we suffer under false accusations. As Peter tells us: “For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps; Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; when He was reviled, did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:20-23). J. C. Ryle writes,

Let it never surprise true Christians if they are slandered and misrepresented in this world. They must not expect to fare better than their Lord. Let them rather look forward to it, as a matter of course, and see in it a part of the cross which everyone must bear after conversion. Lies and false reports are among Satan’s choicest weapons. When he cannot deter people from serving Christ, he labors to harass them and make Christ’s service uncomfortable. Let us bear it patiently, and not count it a strange thing. The words of the Lord Jesus should often come to our minds: “Woe to you when all men speak well of you” (Luke 6:26). “Blessed are you when

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242 Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 559.
people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kind of evil against you because of me’” (Matthew 5:11).

Jesus also sets forth an example of wisdom. When we are before men who are only interested in finding fault when there is none, then we should imitate the Savior and remain silent. Under such circumstances anything you say, right or wrong, will be used against you. Isaiah warns us regarding the scornful man who watches for iniquity, “Who make a man an offender by a word, and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate, and turn aside the just by empty words” (Isa. 29:21). Sadly, we live in a time when even many church courts are not interested in justice. Where presbyteries and their commissions have vile presuppositions regarding a person (usually a puritan or a conservative), they look for any word to condemn. When in the presence of such ethical and theological dullards, one’s words must be few and carefully weighed.

(5) With the attempt to convict the Savior by the use of false witnesses in shambles, the high priest goes directly to the main question on the minds of everyone in the room. There is a sense of frustration and anger in Caiaphas’ inquiry. “Caiaphas, feeling the full force of Jesus’ silence, intends to counteract that silence.”244 “And the high priest answered and said to Him, ‘I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God’” (Mt. 26:63). With this question the trial reaches its decisive phase. It is as though Caiaphas, in his frustration, wants to forget all the formalities of the trial and go directly to the heart of the matter. There are a number of things we need to note regarding this question.

First, the high priest compels Jesus to answer by charging Him under an oath to God to speak the truth. The word exorkizo translated “I adjure” (KJV, NASB, RSV), “charge under oath” (NIV) or “put under oath” (NKJV) is a rare, formal, judicial expression used when invoking the name of God in order to compel a true answer.245 It is similar to our modern American court where a witness places his right hand on the Bible and swears before God to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Caiaphas in his official capacity as the high priest, the highest legal authority in Israel, demands that Jesus take an oath before the ever watchful eye of Jehovah. By appealing to God—the living One—the court is telling the man under oath that Jehovah hears what he is about to say and will without question punish him if he utters a false statement in God’s name. Such false testimony would be equivalent to violating the third commandment which says, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who taketh His name in vain” (Ex. 20:7). James Durham gives us a sense of the seriousness of this commandment:

It is a sin immediately against God Himself, and is not, as sins of the second table, nay not as other particular sins of the first table, whereby men divert from God to idolatry, giving to idols what is His due, or turn their back on Him, or slight His commanded worship, as in the first, second and fourth commands; but this does immediately and directly, and by commission, terminate on God Himself most daringly and presumptuously, as it were affronting Him who has made Himself known by His name.246

It is ironic that Caiaphas, the great liar, appeals to the third commandment at this trial; for the appeal in this context of trumped up charges and false witnesses is a violation of the third commandment itself. Yes, the living God is present and is listening. However, it is Caiaphas who is guilty of a daring and presumptuous sin, not Jesus.

Second, the question, although simple and direct, was very devious, for our Lord could only condemn Himself by His answer. If Christ said that He was not the Messiah, then He could be exposed as an imposter or even a false prophet, for He had claimed to be the Christ. A negative answer would have been the end of His ministry; the people could no longer place their hope in Him. He would no longer be a threat to the corrupt Jewish authorities. If He answered in the affirmative, then the Sanhedrin would present Him to the Romans as a dangerous revolutionary, an alternative king to Caesar. “[T]he council was prepared to regard the open and unequivocal claim of Jesus to be the Messiah a capital crime. Judaism expected the Messiah to provide proof of his identity. A Messiah imprisoned, abandoned by his followers, and delivered helpless into the hands of his foes represented an impossible conception. Anyone who, in such circumstances, proclaimed himself to be the Messiah could not fail to be a blasphemer who dared to make a mockery of the promises given by God to his people.”

The whole question was designed to drive Jesus into a corner.

Third, in God’s providence, the question is of the greatest significance for it gives Christ the opportunity almost immediately before His crucifixion to state, in a public forum under the most solemn of oaths, the clear truth about who He really is.

It is interesting that an examination of the Savior’s ministry indicates that our Lord had never openly declared to the Jewish people, “I am the Messiah.” He rather revealed Himself in an implicit manner. William Hendriksen writes,

Now it cannot be said that up to this time Jesus had never revealed himself as such. In His conversation with the Samaritan woman had he not very definitely declared himself to be indeed the Messiah? See John 4:25, 26. Had he not defended those who addressed him as “the Son of David” (Matt. 21:15, 16)? Had he not, by implication, referred to himself as “the stone rejected by the builders but made the cornerstone” (21:42)? Had he not pointed to himself as “the Son of man” destined one day to judge all men (25:31-46)?

All of this is true. But it could be argued that a declaration made in Samaria did not necessarily reach the Jews; that Matt. 21:15, 16 was not a direct claim but only a reflection on an exclamation made by others; that Matt. 21:37-39; 21:42 are parabolic, hence not direct; and that the term “Son of man” was not interpreted in the same way by everybody. It can even be added that there were definite reasons why during the earlier part of his ministry Jesus did not openly declare to the Jews, “I am the Messiah.” See on 8:4; 9:30; 17:9. They would certainly have misunderstood it. See John 6:15. But now that the events that were happening with

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[4] Of our accountability to Him as our Sovereign and Judge. Hence ‘to swear by the name of Jehovah,’ and to acknowledge Him as God, are the same things. The former involves the latter.... Such being the case, it is evident that a man who denies the truths above mentioned cannot take an oath. For him the words he utters have no meaning. If he does not believe that there is a God; or suppose that he admits that there is some being or force which may be called God, if he does not believe that that Being knows what the juror says, or that He will punish the false swearer, the whole service is a mockery.... But acts of worship involving the acknowledgment of the being and attributes of God, and of our responsibility to Him, they are in their nature good.... As an oath involves an act of worship, it is plain that it should not be taken on any trivial occasion, or in an irreverent manner” (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 3:307, 308, 310).

reference to him were making it clear that his Messiahship was that of the Suffering Servant, as he had himself declared again and again to his disciples (12:40; 16:21; 17:22, 23; 20:18, 19; John 3:14), the moment had also arrived to come forth with a very clear statement, made before the highest authorities of the Jewish nation.\footnote{William Hendriksen, \textit{Matthew}, 244.}

The time for any obscurity or secrecy regarding His true identity was over. Now that Jesus was about to die as a sacrifice for sin and any temptation by the people to make a political conqueror out of Him was over, the time had come to explicitly reveal Himself. In Matthew 16:20 “He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.” But with His death and resurrection the whole world must know the truth. “The Jews could never say after these words that they were not clearly told that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ of God.”\footnote{J. C. Ryle, \textit{Mark}, 242.}

Fourth, the question has two aspects. “Are you the Christ, the Son of God?” The phrase “Son of God” qualifies the term “Messiah.” Caiaphas is asking Jesus if He is the anointed King, the fulfillment of Psalm 2. “The kings of the earth set themselves…against the LORD and against His anointed…. I will declare the decree: the LORD has said to Me, You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession” (vs. 2, 7, 8).

The word Messiah is a transliteration of the Hebrew \textit{Mashiach} which means “an anointed One.” In the Old Testament the practice of anointing was used for cultic objects (i.e. every object relating to the ceremonial worship was consecrated, set apart or made holy by the special oil of anointing); the priesthood or all the descendants of the house of Aaron (Ex. 30:30); and Kings (e.g., Saul, David, Solomon, Joash, etc). The phrase “the anointed of the LORD” was even used as a synonym for the king of Israel (1 Sam. 12:3, 5). “Anointing conveyed sanctity to the person who now stood under the special protection of the God of Israel (cf. 1 Sam. 24:5ff.) This rite of commission to high office was not only symbolic of the gifts requisite for that office but was regarded as a charismatic bestowal of such gifts (cf. 1 Sam. 16:13; Isa. 61:1).”\footnote{J. Jocz, “Messiah” in the \textit{Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible}, 4:199.} Interestingly, the simple, brief form of the title “the Messiah” does not occur in the Old Testament. “The word always has a qualifying genitive or suffix attached to it: ‘the Messiah of Jehovah’ (‘the Lord’s Anointed’), or ‘my Messiah’ (‘mine Anointed’).”\footnote{Geerhardus Vos, \textit{The Self-Disclosure of Jesus} (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), 104.} After the close of the Old Testament canon, the designation for this coming, great eschatological king was abbreviated into the simple term “Messiah.”

The anointing of the priests and kings of the Old Testament pointed to the anointing of Christ, the great priest-king. Jesus, however, was not anointed with oil but with the Holy Spirit beyond measure. “When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’” (Mt. 3:16-17). “For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure” (Jn. 3:34). The descending of the Holy Spirit upon the Savior at His baptism was a setting apart unto the Messianic office and a public declaration by God that Jesus is the Messiah. This anointing was unique in that it was unlimited and permanent. For Peter this anointing was an important part of the gospel message. When the
gospel was first preached to the Gentiles he said, “The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all…. How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (Ac. 10:36, 38). It is important that we do not forget the significance of the term Christ. Paul and the other apostles writing by the Holy Spirit favored the combination “Jesus—Christ” or “Christ—Jesus,” thus continually emphasizing the legitimate standing of the Savior in His office of Messiah.

The expression son (or Son) of God has four different meanings in Scripture. a) The phrase or its equivalent can refer to God’s people. In Genesis six it refers to the godly line of Seth. “Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful…” (1-2). In Exodus, Jehovah refers to Israel as His firstborn (4:22). In the prophecy of Hosea God speaks to Israel saying, “out of Egypt I have called My Son.” (This passage is also a reference to Jesus coming back from safety in Egypt to accomplish His redemptive work). In Psalm 82:6 God refers to the judges of Israel as “children of the Most High.” John says that everyone who is born again is a child of God. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:13). Therefore we cry “Abba Father” and pray “Our Father which art in heaven” (Mt. 6:9).

b) The phrase Son of God is often used in a trinitarian sense which affirms the sonship of Christ “as existing in eternity before the world was, as something not only antedating but absolutely transcending his human life and his official calling as Messiah” (cf. Mt. 11:27; 14:26, 33; 16:16; 21:33-46; 22:41-46; Jn. 6:69; 8:16, 18, 23; 10:15, 30; Rom. 1:3; 8:3; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 1:1, etc). This meaning is common in Paul’s Christology and was even used by Jesus Himself in passages such as Matthew 11:27, “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” This statement is really quite amazing. It means that “there are mysteries in the person, Jesus, which none but the infinite and eternal God can know.”

c) The expression Son of God is used because Christ’s human nature is ascribed in Scripture “to the direct, supernatural paternity of God.” “And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God’” (Lk. 1:35). “The son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God” (Lk.3:38). Both the first Adam and the second Adam are the son of God in a unique sense.

d) The expression Son of God is also used not as an expression of nature, but as an official Messianic title. It describes the special kingly office of the Redeemer not only as the special descendant of David prophesied in Scripture to rule forever, but also with reference to the universal authority bestowed on the theanthropic Savior at the resurrection (Mt. 28:18). Paul said that “Christ our Lord…was…declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:3-4). Peter preached, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Ac. 2:36). Even though by His very nature Jesus was the Son of God; in consequence of

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252 Ibid., 141.
254 Geerhardus Vos, 141.
the Savior’s death and resurrection, God declares that He indeed is the Messiah, who is the sovereign Lord. The Savior has royal status by nature, by the incarnation and by the resurrection. All of these aspects are intimately connected. “Just as little as ‘the Father’ and ‘Lord of heaven and earth’ are titles derived from the soteric situation, just as little is ‘the Son’ a designation of Jesus ultimately derived from that. He is called ‘the Son’ not simply because of his being the Messiah, but because his Messiahship is determined by an anterior sonship lying back of it.”

Before the resurrection our Lord was the Son of God in suffering, the Christ in humiliation. But after the resurrection the Mediator is exalted and enthroned. Now, He is the Christ, the Son of God with power. Paul says, that God “raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church…” (Eph, 1:20-22).

The question that naturally comes to mind regarding Caiaphas’ question is: what did he mean by the expression “Son of God?” Was he using the phrase only as synonym or title for Messiah? A number of commentators hold this position arguing that the Jewish writings from the time of Jesus and the apostles understood “Son of God” only in a messianic sense. Jewish hopes were directed to the Messiah who was a great man, a man of men, “but was limited to a single issue: do you claim to be the Messiah?” Hagner writes, “There is no need to suppose by this language that the high priest meant exactly what the early church meant by this phrase in its Christology. That the Messiah would be the Son of God, even uniquely so (though, of course, metaphysically distinct from God), was quite probably the high priest’s understanding.”

Although most modern commentators do not believe that Caiaphas had deity in mind, there is a good possibility that the high priest was using “Son of God” in a metaphysical sense in his question. While it is true that Jews at that time did not regard the Messiah as a divine-human person, nevertheless the Jewish leaders had at times already confronted the Savior with His claim to be God. The Jews wanted to “kill Him, because He…said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God” (Jn. 5:18). After our Lord said “Son, thy sins be forgiven thee” the scribes reasoned “in their hearts, why doth this man speak blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only?” (Mk. 2:5-11). When the Savior declared, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.’ Then they took up stones to throw at Him” (Jn. 8:57-58). Later Christ said, ‘I and My Father are one’….the Jews took up stones again to stone Him,” saying, “‘For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because thou being a man, makest thyself God’” (Jn. 10:28-29). Further, throughout His ministry, Jesus spoke of the Father as His direct sender in a unique and unmistakable manner (cf. Jn. 5:19-47; 8:16-19, 53, 58). Given all of these examples of the Savior asserting His deity publicly and the very hostile manner in which the Jews responded to it, can anyone doubt that the leadership had not been informed of Christ’s amazing claims? With this history in mind it is likely that Caiaphas hoped that Jesus would admit to His metaphysical sonship with the Father.

(6) After this question the Savior breaks His silence. His answer contains two elements. First, He directly answers the question. “Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you said’” (Mt. 26:64). “‘I am’” (Mk. 14:62). Our Lord openly confessed that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. John Gill gives us the richness of this confession:

255 Ibid., 151.
257 Donald Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 799.
…the Christ, the anointed of God, who was so from everlasting, and in time; being before the world was, installed into, and invested with the office of mediator; and in the fullness of time, anointed with the Holy Spirit without measure: he might truly say he was the Messiah, since all the characters of him in the books of the prophets, met in him; and all the miracles he was to work in proof of his Messiahship were wrought by him: as also that he was the son of God, not by creation, as angels and men; nor by adoption, as saints; nor as man, or in the human nature, in which he was the son of man, and not the son of God; not was he begotten as man, whereas he is called the only-begotten son, and the begotten of the father; and was he the son of God as man, not the first, but the third person must be his father; besides, he was the son of God before his incarnation: nor as mediator neither; he was the son of God, antecedent to his office as mediator; his sonship is distinct from it, is an illustration of it, and what puts virtue into it; but he is so as God, as a divine person, by natural and eternal filiation; being begotten of the father in the divine essence, and of the same nature; and having the same perfections with him, and in all things equal to him; and is the sense in which he always affirmed God to be his father, and himself to be his son.258

Second, He gives the Sanhedrin a bold and amazing prophetic promise: “Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mt. 26:64; cf. Mk. 14:62). There are a number of things to note regarding this statement.

a) Our Lord uses the authoritative formula, “I say to you.” When a prophet would speak in such a situation he would always appeal to the fact that the words he spoke originated with God. He would use phrases such as “thus saith the LORD,” “the LORD says” and so on. But Jesus spoke on His own authority. Only God could speak in the way our Savior did.

The answer “I say to you” also has all the characteristics of a pronouncement as well as a confession. Schilder writes,

This was the last and the perfect fulfillment of Christ’s prophetic office in the state of humiliation which He performed over against His people. In the final hour He reaches into the highest council and confesses Himself. Now He has sworn this good confession in the presence of the Sanhedrin and of Caiaphas. Now His official obedience has attained perfect faithfulness to itself. And this was done in the very hour in which the demand of Caiaphas was, as we saw, a denial of Christ, just as Peter’s extravagant oaths, as we shall see later, also denied Him. Over against this denial of His work and of the essence of His being, then, Christ places the good confession.259

b) Christ’s statement brings together two important messianic passages: Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13. Both of these passages speak of the exaltation and enthronement of the divine human Mediator at the right hand of God; the place of supreme honor and authority. Psalm 110:1 reads, “The LORD said to my Lord, sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.” The Sanhedrin did not understand the biblical concept of the suffering servant. They believed it was impossible for the Man in bonds before them, who was in a state of humiliation, to be the exalted Messiah. Jesus tells them that He will soon take His seat next to God Himself

259 Klaas Schilder, Christ on Trial, 132.
and that He will have absolute power over His enemies. In other words, soon the tables will be turned.

The Daniel passage also speaks of the ascension and enthronement of the Messiah. “I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away, and His kingdom the one which will not be destroyed” (7:13-14). Since our Lord’s reference to Daniel is so often misinterpreted, it is important that we do not misunderstand Jesus’ statement. Many interpreters teach that the Savior’s allusion to coming with the clouds is a reference to the parousia or second coming of Christ. In other words, the Sanhedrin will be eye-witnesses of his glory in the distant future when He returns to judge the quick and the dead. At the second coming the One before them will be the judge and these wicked men will have to answer for this great injustice they are now committing. This interpretation is very popular with premillennialists who view the kingdom essentially as wholly future.

Although this interpretation is a legitimate application of what our Lord said, it is not the meaning of Daniel 7:13ff. The prophecy of Daniel does not refer to a coming to earth but rather to the ascension; to a coming up to God the Father—the Ancient of Days. Although the New Testament often speaks of the Savior receiving all power and authority at the resurrection (Mt. 28:18; Rom. 1:3-4), Scripture treats the resurrection, ascension and enthronement of the Mediator as an organic whole, as all crucial aspects of the Redeemer’s exaltation. Daniel 7:13ff. is a description of the enthronement ceremony that occurs in heaven when the Messiah ascends before God and takes His seat of authority at the Father’s right hand. The Son of Man is brought near by angels or ministering spirits. “The tremendous majesty of the scene serves to bring to the fore the importance and dignity—yes, the Deity—of the Person who comes with the clouds of heaven.” 260 Harold Fowler writes,

In Daniel’s vision, coming on the clouds means that the Son of Man was coming onstage, into the scene. It is not a coming toward Daniel or toward earth, but a coming seen from the standpoint of God, since Daniel uses three verbs that all indicate this: “coming…approached…was led to” the Ancient of Days. This is no picture of the Second Coming, because the Son of man is going the wrong way for that. His face is turned, not toward earth, but toward God. His goal is not to receive His saints, but to receive His kingdom (Cf. 1 Peter 3:22; Luke 19:12; Acts 2:32-36; 3:22; 5:31; Col 3:1; Rev. 3:21). 261

261 Harold Fowler, The Gospel of Matthew (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1985), 4:487. “Our discussion of the meaning of Daniel 7:13 in its Old Testament context led us to the conclusion that its keynote is one of vindication and exaltation to an everlasting dominion, and that the ‘coming’ of verse 13 was a coming to God [the Ancient of Days] to receive power, not a ‘descent’ to earth. When we studied Jesus’ use of these verses, we found that in every case this same theme was the point of the allusion, and, in particular, that nowhere (unless here) was verse 13 [in Daniel 7] interpreted of his coming to earth at the Parousia. In particular, the reference to Mark 14:62, where the wording is clearly parallel to that in the present verse [Mark 13:26], was to Jesus’ imminent vindication and power, with a secondary reference to a manifestation of that power in the near future. Thus, the expectation that Jesus would in fact use Daniel 7:13 in the sense in which it was written is amply confirmed by his actual allusion. He saw in that verse a prediction of his imminent exaltation to an authority which supersedes that of the earthly powers which have set themselves against God…. Jesus is using Daniel 7:13 as a prediction of that authority which he exercised when in AD 70 the Jewish nation and its leaders, who had condemned him, were overthrown, and Jesus was vindicated as the recipient of all power from the Ancient of Days” (R. T. France, Jesus and the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, (1971) 1982], 235, 236).
Jesus couples these two messianic passages together because they both speak of His enthronement and authority. He is given “dominion, glory and kingship” which are both universal and everlasting. He is given victory over all His enemies in heaven and on earth. This victory will be progressively carried out in history by the Holy Spirit. It will be accomplished by judgments in history and then completed at the second—bodily, visible, literal—coming of Christ. If these men had any trust in the Scriptures at all, they would have been on their knees trembling in fear before Jesus, begging for mercy. But they had no faith whatsoever. Thus in Luke’s account our Lord said, “If I tell you, you will by no means believe.”

The implications of what Jesus says are very important. Our Lord is directly rebuking the Jewish concept of a political Messiah or nationalistic deliverer so common in His own day. The Savior’s triumph is not political or military; but rather is spiritual. His triumph is at the right hand of God. The kingdom with power is not in the distant future, but in the immediate future at the resurrection and ascension. By way of application, note that the premillennial concept of a future kingdom which is centered in Jerusalem and is maintained by military might or external coercion is very similar to the Jewish conception that our Lord rejected. This interpretation is supported by our next consideration.

c) The exaltation of Christ is to take place very soon. Our Lord said to the Sanhedrin, “hereafter [or literally ‘from now on’] you [plural] will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mt. 26:64). Luke’s account says, “Hereafter [‘from now on’] the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the Power of God” (22:69). The expression “from now on” in this context refers not to that exact moment of time, but to the very near future only a few days away (3 days by Jewish reckoning) when the Savior would rise from the dead as the exalted King of kings. It is simply bad exegesis to argue that “from now on” refers to the second coming and general judgment over two thousand years in the future. The men standing in front of Jesus would literally see proof in their own lifetimes that the Man they unjustly convicted and put to death as a common criminal had been vindicated and exalted to the place of ultimate authority. 262 These apostate leaders will see with their own eyes that everything Christ said under oath was absolutely true.

Christ will ascend and lean upon the bosom of the Father and not be consumed because, as God, He always existed as the begotten of the Father; as man, the second Adam, He perfectly obeyed the law and conquered sin and death on the cross. The Christological day of the LORD, where the full brunt against sin has burned itself out on the lamb of God, will soon be completed. By His death the Sanhedrin and the old order is cast aside and replaced by the church of Jesus Christ. The Sanhedrin’s unbelief and injustice is used of God to usher in the kingdom of His dear Son, which is universal in scope and without end. “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’S doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Mk. 12:10-11). The future belongs to the Man in bonds before them. Early Sunday morning the fate of the Sanhedrin and the unbelieving Jewish nation will be sealed when the rich man’s tomb is unsealed. From now on, Jesus is the King with power.

Our Lord’s prediction of His glorification is an implicit prediction of the downfall and judgment of the Jewish leaders. From this statement we can draw an excellent application for unbelievers and obstinate apostates, as well as Christians who are suffering unjustly for the Master. Calvin writes,

262 “That is, after all, what the second-person address would naturally imply: the vision will be that of those who hear Jesus speaking, not of some future generation” (R. T. France, The Gospel of Matthew, 611).
For how comes it that wicked men are so much at their ease? How comes it that they are so insolent in rebellion, but because they do not set a high value on the crucified Jesus? It is therefore necessary to remind them of a dreadful judgment, which, with all their stupidity, they will not be able to avoid. And though they ridicule as a fable what is said about the future coming of Christ, still it is not in vain that the Judge summons them to his tribunal, and orders them to be summoned by the preaching of the Gospel, that they may be rendered the more inexcusable. But this announcement is fitted to be of very great use even to believers, that they may now with the eyes of hope look for Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father, and patiently wait till he comes, and may likewise believe that the rage of wicked men against him, while absent, will not be without its consequences; for they will be compelled to behold him on high coming from heaven, whom now they not only despise but even trample upon in their pride.  

The very One who ascends with the clouds (Dan. 7:13; Ac. 1:9) will return with the clouds for judgment. The Jews rejected the claims of Jesus and put Him to death. They even severely persecuted the church for forty years after the Savior’s death and resurrection. But, with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the slaughter of the Sanhedrin and their families by the Romans and the total destruction of the temple, the truth of Christ’s words cannot be denied. “The generation that Jesus said would not pass away until all these things came to pass [Mt. 24:34-35] finally came to understand the implications of their rebellion: Jesus is the one who was given ‘[D]ominion, Glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him’ (Daniel 7:14).”  

d) The phrase “with the clouds,” which can mean “in connection with the clouds,” or “surrounded by clouds,” or “upon the clouds” (LXX), is clearly associated in Scripture with Jehovah. “Behold, the LORD rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt; the idols will totter at His presence” (Isa. 19:1). “O LORD my God…who makes the clouds His chariot” (Ps. 104:1, 3). In the Bible clouds often are associated with God’s special presence (Ex. 13:21; 14:24; 19:9; 20:21; 24:15; 33:9; 34:5; 1 Kg. 8:12), and His judgment (Isa. 19:1; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 2:2; Ps. 97:2-4; Nah. 1:3). Daniel 7:13 fits perfectly with Psalm 110:1 because the One who comes before the Father is on or with the clouds, which is indicative of Deity, yet He is distinct from “the Ancient of Days.” The members of the Sanhedrin understood the clouds terminology better than many modern interpreters. They understood that Jesus was placing Himself metaphysically on the same level with Jehovah, the covenant God of Israel. Whenever we encounter cloud terminology associated with the judgment of Israel (Mt. 24:30) and the second bodily coming of Christ (Rev. 1:7), we must remember the terminology of Daniel 7:13ff, which refers to the ascension and enthronement of the divine-human mediator that is the inauguration of this authority. With the resurrection and enthronement of the Savior “the Father…has committed all judgment to the Son.”

The Savior Condemned

Jesus’ statement gives Caiaphas and the council exactly what they want. To an unbeliever the Savior’s words could be only construed as madness, blasphemy or both. Thus the high priest responds with excitement. “Then the high priest tore his clothes saying, ‘He has spoken  

blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! What do you think?’ They answered and said, ‘He is deserving of death’” (Mt. 26:65-66; cf. Mk. 14:63-64).

The wicked hypocrisy of Caiaphas is exposed when we compare his words to his actions. He acts shocked and rends his garments. To the Jew the tearing of the garments represented incredible sorrow, shock or outrage. “According to M. Sanh. 7:5 when the judges hear blasphemy they are to ‘stand up on their feet and tear their garments, and they may not mend them again.’ The custom of tearing one’s clothing reaches back to the earliest times of biblical history. The action conveyed great anguish and/or penitence.”265 Reuben tore his clothes when he saw that Joseph was no longer in the pit (Gen. 37:29). Job tore his robe when he heard about the destruction of his property and the death of his children (Job 1:20). After she was violated Tamar tore her robe and put ashes on her head (2 Sam. 13:19). For Caiaphas, however, it was an action devoid of sorrow or real anguish for two reasons. First, it is likely, based on previous statements, that the high priest was not very surprised by Christ’s words. Second, his words have an air of relief and joy to them “as if to say, ‘We’ve got him now.’”266

In response to our Lord’s answer the Sanhedrin’s verdict was unanimous. As Mark notes, “And they all condemned Him to be worthy of death” (14:64). “No reflection, no careful consideration was needed.”267 There was not one voice of protest or doubt in the whole assembly. Our Lord had predicted the outcome in Mark 10:33, “The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles.”

This condemnation relating to the charge of blasphemy raises the question: What did Jesus say that the court regarded as blasphemous? The pentateuchal law concerning blasphemy is found in Leviticus 24:16, “And whosoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall certainly stone him, the stranger as well as him who is born in the land. When he blasphemes the name of the LORD, he shall be put to death.” “The word blasphemy in the Hebrew is *naqah*, to curse, revile, puncture or pierce. It means to seek to destroy.”268 To commit blasphemy would involve a serious infringement against Jehovah’s majesty and an attack upon His honor. There was something that the Savior said that the Sanhedrin regarded as a mocking of God, as an open attack on God’s name. Was it our Lord’s claim to be the Messiah? No. Such a claim, even if wrong, would not constitute blasphemy. Did Christ use the name of Jehovah in a careless or vain manner? No, certainly not. The only logical answer to this question is that the Jews understood Jesus to be using the phrase “Son of God” as an assertion of equality with God.269 That the council understood our Lord in this manner is

269 “We cannot certainly determine how these two expressions, ‘the Christ,’ and ‘the Son of God,’ were connected in the mind of Caiaphas. It may be that he regarded them as of substantially the same meaning, though it may be questioned how far the title, Son of God, was one of the customary titles of the Messiah at this time. Still it had been so often and openly applied to Jesus, that we cannot well suppose Caiaphas ignorant of it. At the time of His baptism, John the Baptist testified of His Divine Sonship (John i. 34): ‘I saw and bare record that this is the Son of God.’ Very soon after (verse 49), Nathanael thus avows his faith: ‘Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou are the King of Israel.’ Often was He thus addressed by evil spirits whom He cast out (Matt. viii. 29; Mark iii. 11, v. 7; Luke iv. 41, vii.28). After the stilling of the tempest (Matt. xiv. 33), those in the ship said (Mark xv. 39), ‘Truly this was the (a) Son of God.’ Only in one instance, however, did Jesus directly claim for Himself this title (John ix. 35-37),
supported by John 19:7, “The Jews answered him [Pilate], ‘We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.’” Further, (as noted) the coming with the clouds terminology also gave the Savior divine status.

Given the claims of Jesus, both here and in other sections of the gospels (Jn. 5:17-26; 8:57-59; 10:28-39; Mk. 2:5-11), we must either believe that Jesus was who He claimed to be, “the Son of God” in the fullest sense of the term, the second person of the trinity, equal with God in power and glory, of the same essence with the Father; or, we must take the position of the Sanhedrin that Christ was a liar who was indeed guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death.

Regarding the Redeemer, there are really only two positions that people can hold. With Jesus, the apostles and all true Christians throughout history, we can trust in the Nazarene as God and man in one person. Or, we can side with the enemies of God and Christ and reject His claims of deity and supreme authority. Those who side with the Sanhedrin are many: Jews, Mohammedans, Unitarians, all the Unitarian cults, atheists, modernists, agnostics and so forth. You need to ask yourself this question: What side are you on? Our Lord said, “He who is not with Me is against Me” (Mt. 12:30). He also said that everyone who refuses to confess Him publicly before men “will be denied before the angels of God” (Lk. 12:8-9). If you reject the deity of the Savior, then you are implicitly accepting the guilty verdict against the Redeemer. You are saying that He was indeed crucified justly. We hope and pray that you would reject such a belief as truly blasphemous.

The trial of Jesus is one of the greatest proofs of Christ’s divinity in Scripture, for He spoke the truth about Himself under oath to God knowing that the truth would lead directly to the bloody cross. If He was what unbelief Israel said, then he deserved to die as a blasphemer. But, if He was who He claimed to be and who His miracles and glorious resurrection proved Him to be, then we must bow the knee before Him, worship Him, trust in Him and serve Him with the whole heart as the Son of the living God, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. “And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, ‘Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.’ And the four beasts said, ‘Amen.’ And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped Him that liveth forever and ever” (Rev. 5:14).

**The Jews Mock and Beat the Messiah**

Having convicted the Son of God of blasphemy and condemned Him to death, the Sanhedrin reveals their total corruption, inner depravity and hatred of Jesus by severely abusing Him. “Now the men who held Jesus mocked Him and beat Him. And having blindfolded Him, they struck Him on the face and asked Him, saying, ‘Prophesy! Who is the one who struck You?’ And many other things they blasphemously spoke against Him” (Lk. 22:64-65). Although Luke identifies the men who held Jesus as temple police and palace guards, Matthew and Mark leave open the possibility that members of the Sanhedrin also took part. Mark’s account says “some” (14:65), while Matthew says “they.” Even if the members of the Sanhedrin did not participate in this cruel beating and mocking of Christ, they still were fully responsible for what occurred.

although He often indirectly applied it to Himself. (So John xi. 4) In like manner He repeatedly speaks of God as His father (John v. 17)” (Samuel J. Andrews, *Life of our Lord upon the Earth*, 515-516).
This abuse of our Lord involved a number of things. First, both Mark and Matthew tell us they spit in the Savior’s face (Mk. 14:65; Mt. 26:67). “Spitting is a universal way of expressing contempt and insult.”

When Job describes the great state of his humiliation under his affliction he writes, “They abhor me, they keep far from me; they do not hesitate to spit in my face” (29:10). In Old Testament law the man who refuses to take on the responsibility of Levirate marriage was to be (in the presence of the court) symbolically humiliated by his deceased brother’s wife removing his sandal and spitting in his face (Deut. 25:90). The purpose of the spitting was not merely to express anger but also to demonstrate shame. Therefore, the men who spit in the face of Christ were not only expressing their hatred and contempt toward Jesus but were also seeking to humiliate Him and bring shame upon His name. “It was not enough to have taken prisoner a person of most blameless and charitable life. They must needs add insult to injury.”

To the Jews there was nothing more reproachful and disgraceful than having someone spit in your face. “[T]he Jews say [in the Babylonian Talmud], that he that spits before, or in the presence of his master, is guilty of death, so nauseous and filthy was it accounted; and how much more must it be so, to spit in the face of any one? Hereby a prophecy was fulfilled, Isa. 1.6. I hid not my face from shame and spitting: and hereby, together with his sweat and blood, his visage was more marred than any man’s, and his form than the sons of men.”

For wicked men who harbor the most bitter, vindictive and hateful thoughts against our Lord, it is not enough to condemn Him to death unjustly. He must also writh on the ground like a worm.

Second, they mocked Jesus by covering His eyes, beating Him with their fists and asking Him to prophesy who struck Him. This beating was not merely a slapping with the open hand but a brutal beating with fists and possibly even with sticks (rapizo can refer to a beating with a rod or whip). At this point in our Lord’s suffering, the Jews are focusing their mockery on the Savior’s claim to be the Messiah, “Prophesy unto us thou Christ” (Mt. 26:68), and His ability to prophesy. The Jews mock Jesus in a manner which is unique, which flows from their own apostate worldview. Schilder’s comments on this uniqueness are insightful. He writes,

It is for this reason that this particular piece of mockery is to be differentiated from that which overtook the Saviour later in the palace of Pilate, and also from that with which He was afflicted on the hill of the cross. True, after Pilate’s sentence also, Jesus was mocked. Simply recall to mind the crown of thorns. And He was made the butt of mockery again in Herod’s presence. You remember the gorgeous robe. Moreover, He was mocked even as He hung on the cross itself. Remember the jest-prompted summoning of Elijah, and the way in which the people abused Jesus’ maschil—His breaking down and rebuilding of the temple.

Each time that mockery recurs, it occupies a different, a unique position in the gospel of the passion. First it is Israel that mocks Him; next the world of heathendom; then the false brother; and finally it is the company of all these together. Israel first: the Sanhedrin, judges and servants both. Heathendom next: the soldiers of Pilate, prompted to do so by Pilate himself; in other words, the servants and their patrons. After that the false brother: Herod, who traces his lineage to Edom, that is, to Esau, Jacob’s pursuer from long ago even to the present time. And finally, these all acting as a unit mocked Him, when all those who stood around the cross joined in defying the Christ.
Therefore we say that the mockery which Jesus has to endure in the presence of the Sanhedrin occupies a unique place in the account of the passion. He is standing upon the mountain of prophecy. While there He is being degraded by His own people.  

The Jews made a mockery of who the Savior was and what He taught. This was a stinging, cruel rejection of the person of Christ as well as His prophetic role. “There was an ingenuity in the torments inflicted on Jesus worthy of Satan their author…. Perhaps there was a burst of applause when it was first proposed to blindfold those meek and sorrowful eyes, and no doubt a profane laugh was heard, as each blow was struck, and the question was asked, who is it that smote thee?”

How did our Lord respond to the spitting, the blows, the laughter and the insults? According to all the gospel accounts, not one word escaped His lips. There was an amazing silence, calmness and patience. He did not murmur, complain, rebuke or even cry out under the blows and insults. “He was drinking, slowly, with the consciousness of self-surrender, the Cup which His Father had given Him.” He could not rebuke or strike down this depraved rabble, nor could He cry out for mercy. He regarded every injury, insult, indignity, wrath and hatred as a drop in the cup His Father had given Him to drink. Christ could have identified these men instantly. He could have crushed them to pieces with a word. But the time had come to suffer; He had to continue His descent into the abyss of God’s wrath against our sin. It is truly remarkable what Jesus endured to redeem us from our sin and guilt.

This humiliation and suffering of the Savior makes Christianity totally unique among all the world’s religions and worldviews. In fact we could say that it is one of the great proofs of the truth of the Bible. Who in their right mind would place the incarnate God within a circle of fists, mockery and laughter? Who would make up a story that the founder of their religion, who was “God of very God,” would voluntarily submit to be spit upon as the scum of the earth? This amazing reality that “God was made flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14); that the divine-human mediator was hated and rejected by His own people; that He was brutally treated as worse than a dog could never be conceived by sinful mortals. The fact that the Messiah would suffer and die under a curse was a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23). The suffering of Christ was also emphatically rejected by Islam. The Greeks viewed it as utter foolishness (Ac. 17:32; 1 Cor. 1:23). Yet, it is absolutely true. Our minds could never fathom a Savior as great and noble as the one presented in Scripture. He had to drink of the cup to the bitter dregs in order to rescue us from our sin and folly. He had to descend to the very depths of hell to pull us out of the curse that we so definitely deserved. Hallelujah, what a Savior! Paul speaks of this amazing love in Romans: “For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (5:6-10).

There can be no neutrality regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. Will you place yourself in the unbelieving crowd who mocked the Son of God and spit in His face; or, will you believe in Him and worship Him as the divine King? People, of course, will insist that they

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273 Klaas Schilder, Christ on Trial, 177.
275 Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 563.
would never do the Savior harm. They would never spit in His face, beat Him or mock Him. But, is it not an insult toward the Son of God to say, “I do not need to be saved by Him. I’m not really interested in what He did or has to say. I’m far too busy with the things of life to pay Him any regard?” If you do not believe in Jesus and trust in Him as the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lord over all, then you smite Him. You regard His suffering, death and anguish as something that can be trampled underfoot as worthless. You smite Him in that you impugn His infinite love and His power to save. “Oh! ‘Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little.’ That suffering man stands in the room, and place, and stead of every one that will believe on him. Trust him! trust him!—you have then accepted him as your God, as your Messiah. Refuse to trust him!—you have smitten him; and you may think it little to do this to-day; but when he rides upon the clouds of heaven you will see your sin in its true light, and you will shudder to think that ever you could have refused him who now reigns ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’”

Chapter 6: Peter Denies Christ Three Times

And as Peter was beneath in the palace, there cometh one of the maids of the high priest: And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked upon him, and said, “And thou also wast with Jesus of Nazareth.” But he denied, saying, “I know not, neither understand I what thou sayest.” And he went out into the porch; and the cock crew. (Mark 14:66-68)

And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple: that disciple was known unto the high priest, and went in with Jesus into the palace of the high priest. But Peter stood at the door without. Then went out that other disciple, which was known unto the high priest, and spake unto her that kept the door, and brought in Peter. Then saith the damsel that kept the door unto Peter, “Art not thou also one of this man's disciples?” He saith, “I am not.” And the servants and officers stood there, who had made a fire of coals; for it was cold: and they warmed themselves: and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself. (John 18:15-18)

And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, “This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth.” And again he denied with an oath, “I do not know the man.” And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, “Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech betrayeth thee.” Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, “I know not the man.” And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, “Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.” And he went out, and wept bitterly. (Matthew 26:71-75)

Introduction

In the midst of our Lord’s trial, each of the four gospels pause to examine the denials of Peter the apostle. This placement of the narrative is done for two reasons. First, the denials occurred throughout the proceedings of the Sanhedrin. Luke’s account gives us the best time indicators. Some time after coming into the courtyard there is a denial (22:57); then Luke says “after a little while” there is a second denial (22:58). The third denial is said to occur “after a space of about one hour” (22:59). Second, the complete failure of Peter is set before us in sharp contrast to the perfect obedience, courage and faithfulness of the Savior. The gospels repeatedly

emphasize that while we are weak and unable to save ourselves or even cooperate in our redemption, Christ is set forth as the Rock—the Captain of our salvation.

Preliminary Considerations

As we examine these narratives there are some general things that merit our attention. First, the denials of Peter follow an incremental scale of challenge and disobedience. The first challenge is made by a slave girl, a doorkeeper (Jn. 18:16-17). The use of female servants as doorkeepers was apparently common among the wealthy in the ancient world. To this challenge Peter says, “I am not” (Jn. 18:17), or, “Woman, I do not know Him” (Lk. 22:57). After a brief time Peter moves out to the gateway and is confronted by a girl (Mt. 26:71) and at least one man (Lk. 22:58). “Here the charge is that Peter belonged to the group of Jesus’ disciples. The ‘you’ is emphatic.”277 Here Peter goes beyond his first denial in two ways. First, he denies the Lord with an oath. This was a very serious sin. He swore to God that he did not know the Nazarene. We can sense desperation and fear in Peter’s words. Second, in order to emphasize his denial he deliberately uses the impersonal “the man.” “The Son of Man has become to the first of the disciples an anonymous ‘the man.'”278 In the third challenge the apostle is confronted not by one or two people but by a group together (“they,” Mk. 14:70; Mt. 26:73). This group was led by a close relative of Malchus, the servant of the high priest who said, “Did I not see you in the garden with Him” (Jn. 18:26)? Matthew’s account says, “Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you” (26:73). At this point Peter feels trapped and, in his panic, he boldly “began to curse and swear, saying, ‘I do not know the Man’” (Mt. 26:74)! The apostle is so desperate and defensive, he is either calling down God’s wrath upon himself if his statement to the inquirers is not true; or, he may even be calling down curses upon Jesus to prove he is not a disciple. In order to save his own skin, he in effect joins himself to this demonic rabble, the enemies of Christ, many of whom participated in His arrest. Oh, what a grievous sin!

Second, who is the unnamed disciple who spoke to the gatekeeper securing Peter’s entrance into the courtyard (see Jn. 18:16)? There has been a lot of speculation regarding the identity of this “other disciple.” Many excellent scholars and commentators believe it was none other than the apostle John, the writer of the gospel who mentions the incident. In favor of this view it is argued that the details regarding Peter in the courtyard seem to imply it. John’s identity is veiled to a certain degree in his own gospel (cf. 1:27; 13:23; 21:24). This account follows the close association elsewhere between Peter and John. The phrase “known to the high priest” does not mean personal friend but merely an acquaintance. Further, there is evidence that “John the son of Zebedee had priestly connections. His mother was Salome, the sister of the Virgin Mary…; and Mary was a kinswoman (sungenis, Lk. 1:36) of Elizabeth, who was ‘of the daughters of Aaron’ (Lk. 1:5). Hence John was connected with a priestly family on his mother’s side, and there is no improbability in his being ‘known to the high priest.’”279

The position that it was not John is best represented by Arthur W. Pink. He says that:

…it is almost certain that he was not John. In the first place, John was a poor fisherman of Galilee—far removed from Jerusalem—therefore it is most unlikely that he was on sufficiently intimate terms with the high priest as to enter his house, and have authority over the door-

278 Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 806.
Lessons Learned from Peter’s Failure

As we turn our attention to the story of Peter’s denial of His Lord and Savior there are a number of important things to consider for our sanctification: (1) the root cause of Peter’s fall; (2) the immediate cause of Peter’s failure; (3) the look of Jesus toward His fallen disciple; and, (4) the place of Peter’s denial in the humiliation and suffering of Christ.

(1) The root causes of Peter’s sin were many. First, there was Peter’s pride and self-confidence. After our Lord warned the apostle that he would deny Him three times Peter boasted, “Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble” (Mt. 26:33). “If I have to die with You, I will not deny You” (Mk. 14:31). The Bible repeatedly warns us not to place too much confidence in our own abilities. As Paul writes, “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3). Peter’s overconfidence led him into an area of temptation that he was not able to handle. “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18; cf. 18:12; Isa. 10:33). Peter could have avoided sin by being humble, by not trusting in his own abilities, by being sober and cautious. But, the apostle was brash, reckless and proud and rushed headlong into severe temptation and sin. Spurgeon writes, “Oh, that we might look to the roots of bitter flowers, and destroy them! If presumption is flourishing in the soil of our hearts to-day, we shall soon see the evil fruit which will come of it. Reliance upon our firmness of character, depth of experience, clearness of insight, or maturity in grace, will in the end land us in disgraceful failure. We must either deny ourselves, or we shall deny our Lord; if we cleave to self-confidence, we shall not cleave to him.”

This fall of Peter is doubtless intended to be a lesson to the whole Church of Christ. It is recorded for our learning, that we [may] be kept from like sorrowful overthrow. It is a beacon mercifully set up in Scripture, to prevent others making shipwreck. It shows us the danger of pride and self-confidence. If Peter had not been so sure that although all denied Christ, he never would, he would probably never have fallen.

This warning against pride goes completely contrary to our youth-obsessed culture where self-esteem, self-confidence and pride are emphasized as the greatest of virtues. The problem with the church and society today is not a lack of self-esteem but a lack of godly humility. In a nation that worships sports figures, movie stars, models and the rich and successful, there is a sinful admiration of self-reliance and self-confidence. If we follow this worldly spirit and become overconfident and careless, we will fall flat on our faces spiritually. Let us learn the lesson of Peter, be humble and avoid places of temptation even when we think the danger is small.

281 Charles H. Spurgeon, “Peter’s Restoration” in Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, 34:397.
Second, there was Peter’s failure to listen to the Word of God. When Jesus told the disciples about their coming fall at the holy supper, it was not merely to satisfy their curiosity. Although the prophetic word does serve to authenticate a prophet when that word comes to pass (1 Kg. 17:24), prophecy also serves an ethical purpose. A divine warning concerning sin, failure and calamity is intended to bring humility, remorse, caution and repentance to the people of God. When Jonah preached the word to Nineveh, “Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jon. 3:4), the city repented in sackcloth and ashes with fasting (Jon. 3:5-9); and, “God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it” (Jon. 3:10). Peter should have listened to the inspired words from the Master and been extra diligent to avoid any occasion of temptation.

Many professing Christians suffer from the same great error as Peter. They listen to the Word of God but they do not heed its warnings or obey its commands. The law is a light to direct our steps (cf. Prov. 6:23). However, we need to walk in the light of the Lord (Isa. 2:5) if we are to avoid the darkness. Peter was warned from the lips of the Son of God Himself. Sadly, however, he was blinded by pride. Often, it is when we are full of pride and pragmatism that we do not listen to God’s Word. “When we disregard both the Word and warning providence of God, we must not be surprised if He then sets a snare for us. When we insist on having our own way, we must be prepared if God gives us up to our own heart’s lust (Ps. 81:12).” People who ignore the Word are implicitly acting as though they are smarter and wiser than God. Many times it is only when we find ourselves lying face down in the dirt that we realize our supreme folly. May God open our ears to heed the lesson of Peter who denied the Lord because he ignored the Savior’s words.

Third, Peter failed to prepare himself for battle when he slept instead of watching and praying with Christ. Because of what Jesus said at the holy supper regarding the disciples’ coming failure; and, our Lord’s repeated injunctions to watch and pray with Him, one could reasonably expect Peter and the other disciples to put on the whole armor of God in anticipation of the imminent struggle. But the apostle had not watched or prayed, for his flesh was weak. He was too fatigued, emotionally exhausted and sleepy to pray. Therefore, when the apostle was surprised by the temptation he did not have the spiritual strength to conquer it; nor had he taken the time to meditate upon what he would do if such a temptation arose. He was completely unprepared. Beloved, let us not walk into battle half-asleep without a plan of action. We must be diligent in attending the means of grace.

(2) There were also a number of factors that contributed to the immediate cause of Peter’s failure. First, there was the direct influence of the devil. Jesus had warned Peter at the supper saying, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat” (Lk. 22:31). The passion would be a time of a particularly strong satanic attack. Satan wants to sift Peter like wheat. In other words the devil will have God’s permission to try Peter to see if his faith in Christ is genuine or counterfeit. Is the apostle wheat (a true disciple) or chaff (a hypocrite)? Our Lord identified this period as a time when the power of darkness would be especially active (Lk. 22:53). The same type of attack (only much worse) did not have any effect upon the Savior. As the Master said, “the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me” (Jn. 14:30). But poor Peter was caught spiritually unprepared and sinned. “The sparks from Satan’s flint and steel fell upon our Lord as upon water; but Peter’s heart was like a tinder-box; and when the sparks fell, they found fuel there. Oh, that we may be kept from the assaults of Satan! ‘Lead us not into temptation’ is a necessary prayer; but the next petition is specially

noteworthy—‘but deliver us from the evil one.’” Fortunately, Jesus had prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail; and, thus his fall was serious but very brief. Where would we be without the precious intercession of Christ our faithful High Priest?

Second, Peter surrounded himself with the enemies of the Savior. After the apostle gained access to the courtyard, he was standing and warming himself by the fire. During the time that our Lord was being abused by the Sanhedrin, Peter was “warming himself comfortably among the enemies of our Lord, like one of them.” The apostle not only made the dangerous error of deliberately placing himself in a situation of temptation, but he also surrounded himself with evil companions. These wicked men saw Peter’s face in the light of the fire and wanted to know what side Peter was on. Was he a disciple of Jesus or was he part of the crowd that rejected the truth? Peter had an excellent opportunity to confess Christ before men and stand up for his Master. But, instead, he pretended not to know Him. He in effect said, “I am not a Christian. I do not believe in this Nazarene.” He denied his precious Savior to save his skin and please the mob. Peter forgot the biblical principle that, “evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Cor. 15:33).

Tragically, the lessons of Peter’s fall have not been heeded by many professing Christians in our day. Parents often send their little ones into the state schools to be surrounded by the enemies of Jesus. As these children grow older and the temptations come, they are surrounded by the so called “hip” crowd and are asked either explicitly or implicitly: “Will you serve the Christ, the Son of God or will you follow us in the ways of the world into the pleasures of sin” (e.g., drunkenness, fornication, drugs, filthy speech, Sabbath desecration, cursing, lewd dress, disrespect of parents, etc.)? Sadly, statistics say that about two thirds of professing Christian young people (e.g., evangelicals) in this situation chooses to deny the Savior and please the ungodly crowd.

We must learn from the apostle’s fall both not to mingle with bad company and not ever to conceal our commitment to Christ. If you want to avoid temptations at work or school, then constantly be confessing Jesus by your lips and by your actions. “Lewd fellows of the baser sort” are not attracted to godliness; they are repelled by it. Loose women without morals will be repelled by a consistent walk and profession. When people pretend they do not know the Savior because they don’t want to offend co-workers or they are embarrassed by the identification “evangelical Christian,” then they have already lost the battle. The best defense is very often a good offense. Boldly and consistently proclaim your allegiance and love toward Jesus.

We live in a generation where many professors of the Savior want to have it both ways. They want the Son of God as a cosmic Santa Claus, an easy fire escape from hell; but, they also want to be of the world. They want to be popular with unbelievers. They want to enjoy the pleasures of life at the expense of fervency for Christ and His cause. They often even turn their public worship services into a worldly spectacle as if God could be worshipped by the amusements of the theater or rock concert. They are like the backslidden people in Elijah’s day who couldn’t decide whether to follow God or Baal (1 Kg. 18:21). With Elijah we could say to this present generation “How long will you falter between two opinions?” (1 Kg. 18:21). Spurgeon says that all half-hearted people really only have three choices. He writes,

There are three things you can do, and those three things I will set before you by an illustration. When you get outside the Tabernacle, there will be a tramcar. Now, go up to the car, and put one foot on the car, and keep the other foot on the ground, and if you do not come

down with a smash I am very much mistaken. Yet many people try to keep in with the world and keep in with Christ, and they will never do it; but will make a terrible fall of it before long. Now, the second thing that you can do is, that you can keep standing in the world in the mud, and not get into the car at all. You can stop there, and let the tramcar go by: that is all fair and straight. If you want to live in the world, and be of the world, well, live in the world and take what pleasure it can give you and reap the fruit of it at last. But there is a third thing you can do, namely, get right off the road into the car, and let the car take you right away where it is going. Now, it is this third thing that I commend to you. Get right into Christ, and let the Lord Jesus, by the power of his Holy Spirit, carry you right away from the unclean place where you now stand, bearing you safely along the tramlines of holiness till he brings you to the terminus of glory at his own right hand.\(^{286}\)

Third, Peter was guilty of cowardice. The brave Peter, who had bragged that he was willing to die with Jesus, wilted before his Master’s enemies. The great apostle’s faith failed him. He was not focusing on Christ and His precious prayers and promises, but rather was thinking about what would happen to him if he was discovered. This story reminds us of when Peter was bold and brave enough to step out of the boat onto the stormy waters of Galilee to meet his Savior. “But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out saying, ‘Lord save me!’” (Mt. 15:30). Peter knew that Jesus was all alone. He could hear the trial being conducted in the palace. Perhaps not understanding the great humiliation that the Messiah must undergo, his faith wavered. In any case, we must understand the amazing degree of weakness that is found even in godly men. Further, note the deceitfulness of man’s heart! “It is exceedingly corrupt. Who can know it’ (Jer. 17:9).… Think of it: ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God’—‘I don’t know the man.’\(^{287}\)

There can be no question regarding Peter’s love toward his Master. Had he not given up all to follow Christ? Did he not just risk his life when he sliced off the servant of the high priest’s ear? He went to the palace to see if anything could be done. He entered the courtyard out of a true interest in the Lord’s safety. Yet, he played the coward, was ashamed and discouraged. Beloved, no matter how strong our past walk with the Savior has been, there never is a time when we can let down our guard. “Therefore, let him who thinks he stand take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

(3) After Peter’s third denial two things occurred virtually simultaneously that caught Peter’s attention, brought him back to spiritual reality and pierced his soul—the crowing of the rooster (Mk. 14:72; Mt. 26:7; Lk. 22:60; Jn. 18:27) and the look of the Savior (Lk. 22:61). Luke’s account says, “But Peter said, ‘Man I do not know what you are saying!’ Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.’ So Peter went out and wept bitterly” (Lk. 22:60-62). There are a number of things in this passage that we should note for our edification.

First, we see the amazing love and mercy of Jesus for His own people even in the midst of intense suffering. Our Lord had prayed for Peter. He had warned him with prophecy regarding his coming fall and then, after the apostle fell, Christ guided him back to the fold with a look. Even though Peter had disowned his Lord by his denials, the Savior never disowned Peter. Christ, according to His sovereign providence, timed Peter’s final and worst denial with the crow of the rooster and at that precise moment He turned His head to look at Peter. Jesus sent out His

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\(^{286}\) Charles H. Spurgeon, “In the Garden with Him,” 35:518-519.

heart love to Peter by a look. In the midst of intense suffering, with His face black and blue, swollen and bleeding from the blows, with spit dripping off His face, the Son of God looks at Peter with sadness. There was an unfathomable love in the eyes of the Savior.

This incident is important for what it tells us about the love and mercy of Christ. Jesus is in the place of judgment. He has just been convicted of a death penalty offense for which he is totally innocent. He has just suffered a severe beating with insults, mocking and blasphemous jesting. He is being led away to a holding cell while the conspirators plan His crucifixion and what does our blessed Lord concern Himself with? Our Lord is thinking about his fallen disciple. Even in the midst of intense suffering, the Master is completely focused on helping His sheep, those for whom He is about to shed His own blood. “Though now he reigns in glory, he still looks steadily upon his own: his delight is in them, and his care is over them. There was not a particle of selfishness about our Savior.”

The look of Jesus tells us that His love of the sheep is very personal. It is a particular love. There is a popular system of theology today that says that Christ did not suffer and die for particular individuals but for an impersonal mass of humanity, most of whom will not believe and will go to hell forever. This doctrine called Arminianism or semi-Pelagianism cannot account for the very personal, efficacious love that is exhibited here. The love of Christ toward those whom the Father has given Him is greater than the love a mother has for her children. It is infinitely greater than the love a man and woman can have or ever will have for each other. “The love of Christ towards His people, is a deep well that has no bottom…. It exceeds all other love, as far as the sun exceeds the rushlight.” It is a love that reaches out and saves sinners from themselves. It is a love that doesn’t make salvation possible, but actually accomplishes it. It is a love that doesn’t wait for helpless sinners to attempt to save themselves or to cooperate with God. But rather, it powerfully and mercifully deals with us as our Lord dealt with Peter. Beloved, we can safely place our trust in Jesus as both the one who died in our place; and, also as a faithful high priest who with a loving eye continually watches over us. “Christ takes more notice of what we say and do than we think he does.”

Yes, even when we fall the Savior looks on us with tenderness and compassion, to direct us back to the path of faithfulness. Let us not be afraid to trust that love when we confess our sins. “No man need despair, however far he may have fallen, if he will only repent and turn to Christ. If the heart of Jesus was so gracious when He was a prisoner in the judgment hall, we surely need not think it is less gracious, when He sits in glory at the right hand of God.”

This section of Scripture was especially important in the early church where persecution for one’s faith in Christ was an ever present reality. Although Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, Rome was responsible for beheading the chief apostles and plunging the whole Roman church into a baptism of blood. Multitudes of believers were murdered under Nero by beheading, crucifixion, being burned alive and killed by wild beasts. Many professing Christians under these circumstances had denied their relationship to Jesus to save themselves from death. Could such people repent and be readmitted into the visible church after such a heinous sin? The story of Peter’s fall and restoration teaches us that sincere repentance can lead to a full restoration. While Peter’s fall can never and should never be used as an excuse for sin, it does teach us that the

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288 Charles H. Spurgeon, “Peter’s Restoration,” 34:399-400.
290 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:818.
Savior lovingly readmits straying sheep back into the fold. Peter’s bitter experience teaches both how to avoid falling into sin and what to do if we should fall.

Second, we see the power of Christ to redeem in this look. The Savior had looked upon many people during His ministry. He had even looked upon Annas and Caiaphas during the trial. But when Christ looked upon Peter, the look was attended by the piercing of the soul by the Holy Spirit. The Master’s look of deep affection was accompanied by the convicting and convincing power of His Spirit. The gospels tell us that when the rooster crowed and Christ looked, that Peter remembered what Jesus had said. The apostle was enlightened and understood the exact correspondence between the prophecy and its perfect fulfillment. The Holy Spirit stirred the apostle’s heart to reflect on the Word of the Master and repent with tears. When Christ looks upon a sinner with a saving love, there is an efficacy that is irresistible. There is a divine operation on the heart that causes the sinner to see his sins as they truly are. Our Lord “looks into the secret chambers of the soul; for his look is a sunbeam, and bears its own light with it, lighting up the dark places of our nature by its own radiance.”

292 Peter was brought to repentance by the loving gaze of Christ and the heart-piercing arrows of the Spirit. “Do you know anything of the secret love-look of the Lord Jesus?”

293 Whenever we fall into sin we must pray that our Lord will look upon us with love and mercy attended by the secret efficacy of the Spirit. Let us therefore always remember that whenever any of us have fallen, our sincere repentance will never begin until Jesus looks at us as He looked on Peter. With such infinite love can any of us doubt our Savior’s ability and desire to save us?

294 He holds us in His very hands and He promises us that not one of us will be lost (Jn. 6:37, 39; 10:28, 29).

Third, this incident tells us a lot about biblical repentance. In this amazing scene we observe the Savior working upon Peter and see the fallen apostle’s biblical response. We have seen how God used the special working of providence in the timing of the last denial with the crow of the rooster and the look of the Savior. We have also noted how the external means were accompanied by the working of the Holy Spirit, by special efficacious grace. “Power went along with this look, to change the heart of Peter to bring him to himself, to his right mind.”

295 The Holy Spirit enlightened Peter’s mind to the workings of divine providence and pointed his heart to the words of Christ. Now let us examine what Peter did as a result of God’s grace.

a) Peter looked to Christ with the eye of faith. The Savior’s look toward Peter was an instrument used by the Spirit to revive and strengthen Peter’s looking toward the Savior. Although the apostle had warmed himself around the fire with the enemies of our Lord and even denied Him three times, the embers of faith were still burning in his breast. He still had the habit of looking to Jesus. Despite his severe and sudden backsliding, he was still trusting in Christ and looking toward Him. Therefore, when the Master turned and looked at Peter, their eyes met and the apostle’s heart was pierced.

When you backslide and fall into sin there is great hope for you if you look to Christ with faith. You must trust in His imputed righteousness and His victory over the power of sin in your life. The Savior is the fountain or source of our sanctification. If Peter had had his back turned to the Lord and instead was looking upon the vanities of life, the mocking crowd or the wicked world, he would not have been affected by the Savior’s loving look. He would not have had his heart pierced by the arrow of the High Priest’s efficacious stare.

293 Ibid.
295 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:818.
Those backsliders who are comfortable in their sins, who have their back turned toward Christ, who are mesmerized with the lust of the eyes and the pride of life are in great danger of total apostasy. Pray that God would increase your faith so that you would never take your eyes off Jesus, even for a moment. Peter’s fall was short-lived because faith and a continuous life of scandalous sin are such enemies. Peter loved His precious Lord; “his denial was not of the heart, but of the tongue; and, therefore, as all the grounds of his faith came before his mind anew, his heart was broken into a thousand pieces with grief that he should have been false to such a friend.”

b) Peter remembered the words of Jesus. If we are to avoid a fall or be restored from a fall we must remember the Word of God. The Holy Spirit turns us from sin by recalling the Word to our mind, by applying it to our conscience, causing us to loathe our sinful behavior so that we will turn from it to obedience. The Holy Spirit didn’t simply zap Peter in some mystical sense causing him to repent; He worked in and by the Word. As Jesus said, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). If we read and study our Bibles everyday and memorize the sections of it that apply to our weak areas, then we are helping our own sanctification. By doing this, we are placing more of God’s precious Word in our hearts to be used by the Holy Spirit. David understood this principle when he said, “How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word…. Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You…. I will meditate on Your precepts…. I will delight myself in your statutes; I will not forget Your word…. Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law…. Revive me according to Your word…. Make me understand the way of your precepts” (Ps. 119:9, 1, 15, 25, 27). Sanctification and growth in grace involves reading, studying, meditating upon and remembering God’s Word. “As the forgetting of the Lord’s word opens the door to temptation, so the calling of it to remembrance, mixed with faith, is a means of repentance.”

If we are always looking to Christ, then we must always be remembering His Word. It is the Scriptures alone which show us the Master. If we neglect or deny the Bible, then we will neglect and deny the Son of God.

c) Peter went out and wept bitterly (Lk. 22:63; Mt. 26:73; Mk. 14:72). Sincere repentance is accompanied by godly sorrow. “He found out by experience the truth of Jeremiah’s word, ‘It is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord’ (Jer. ii. 19). He felt keenly the truth of Solomon saying, ‘The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways’ (Prov. xiv. 14) No doubt he could have said with Job, ‘I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes’ (Job xlii. 6).”

When a true Christian falls into sin it brings great sorrow. This sorrow no doubt was magnified in Peter because of his strong personal relationship with Christ and his position of great responsibility. The apostle who was designated the rock because of his great confession and his unique place in the Jerusalem church had been unable to face the prospect of a suffering Messiah. The man who had walked on the water toward Jesus had disowned his own Master three times with cursing and swearing. The apostle who had been challenged to take up his cross and be willing to lose his life for the Savior failed miserably. Peter the chief apostle who had boasted of his willingness and ability to die with his Master denies his Lord in the face of one powerless girl. What a fall!

When Peter had his mind awakened to his sin by the Holy Spirit, all of this and more pierced his heart and he went out and wept bitterly. Peter went out into the cold, dark night to

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297 David Dickson, Matthew, 379.
find a place where he could weep alone and confess his sins to Jesus. “Peter’s repentance was secret; he sought a place of retirement where he might mourn unseen. Solitariness is most agreeable to an afflicted spirit.”299 “The strong man would bow in agony…. But the agony would do him good forever. The ‘rock’ was stricken within it. To and fro it rocked, and then burst, and melted, and flowed. Oh how gladly would he have wept, if he could, a whole sea of salt tears!”300 “Dear friends, if we have sinned with Peter, God grant us grace to weep with Peter. Many will think of Peter’s wandering who forget Peter’s weeping. Sin, even though it be forgiven, is a bitter thing; even though Christ may look away your despair, he will not look away your penitence.”301

A genuine believer can never make peace with sin because his regenerate heart is constantly afflicted by it. When David repented of his sin with Bathsheba he said, “I acknowledged my transgressions and my sin is always before me…. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise” (Ps. 51:3, 17). When the Holy Spirit shows us the heinousness of our sin before God, then we are broken before Him. We confess our sins and forsake them. We acknowledge that what we did was wrong and against God. We ask God to forgive all of our sins. And, we ask Him to enable us to avoid these sins in the future. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9).

The man or woman who is mired in scandalous sin, who is not deeply troubled by it and therefore continues in it, is not a Christian. “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (1 Jn. 1:6). “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God” (1 Jn. 3:9). There are many professing Christians in our day who regard sin as a minor thing. They make peace with the flesh, with sin and the world. They do not flee out of Sodom or Egypt, but rather cling to their lusts. They have fallen for the false gospel of easy believism—that a person can accept Jesus as Savior, yet refuse to submit to Him as Lord. While it is indeed true that repentance from sin does not save us, for we are redeemed by Christ alone through faith alone; nevertheless, everyone who truly believes in Christ will repent of his sins. “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:3, 5). Repentance means that “a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments” (The Westminster Confession of Faith, 15:2).

Do you recognize sin for what it really is? Do you hate your sin as an offense against God? Are you willing to forsake your sin and turn to God? Do you have a desire to obey Christ and all His commandments? As believers we are required to die daily (1 Cor. 15:31). Because we are still sinners, repentance from sin as an aspect of our sanctification must be a life-long, habitual practice. Every single day we need to examine our thoughts, words and actions in light of God’s Word and confess, forsake and endeavor after a greater obedience unto God.

There is a great difference between the godly sorrow of Peter that accompanied genuine repentance and remorse such as that experienced by Judas. Many people who are not saved feel regret or sorrow over evil acts that they have committed, but such anguish has nothing to do with

biblical repentance. A person may be sorry because of the consequences of sin, yet not truly hate sin. Hitler, no doubt, was sorry he invaded Russia. Judas was very remorseful about what his betrayal did to Christ. However, neither of these men turned toward God, hated sin as violation against God’s throne or desired to obey God’s commandments. Sorrow must be accompanied by a turning to God. “The falls of a graceless professor are falls from which there is no rising again. But the fall of a true saint always ends in deep contrition, self-abasement, and amendment of life.”

Beloved, let us learn by Peter’s example that sin leads to pain and sorrow. People sin because they think it is fun and that it brings joy to the heart. But, even though sin may be sweet to the taste at first, it eventually will become very bitter to the soul. Every great servant of God who yielded to temptation and fell into scandalous sin eventually shed many tears. Let us avoid temptation and sin in the first place to avoid the agony of offending our precious Savior.

(4) Peter’s denial of Christ increases the humiliation and suffering of the Savior. Peter’s denial occurs in the passion narrative not merely to serve as a contrast to the Messiah’s perfect obedience, faithfulness and courage or as a moral lesson to believers on carelessness or repentance. It is an important aspect in our Lord’s suffering itself. As Jesus moves toward Golgotha, God is isolating Him from any comfort and increasing His suffering. In Gethsemane the disciples fail to watch and pray with their Master. Then, at the arrest, they all abandon Him to save their own skin. Finally, Peter does not simply abandon, but also forsakes the Master three separate times with an oath and curses. When the disciples fled they did not verbally repudiate or curse their Master. They were showing cowardice and disloyalty only implicitly. But Peter repudiates his Lord with curses and oaths. Schilder writes,

When Christ must plunge into a deep recess of the abyss of curse and death—and this is intentional on heaven’s part—Peter is brought into His way, and made to swear in Jesus’ hearing: Who is that stranger? I do not know the man…. That precisely sworn oath is what thrust Him, as the bearer of God’s office, farther into the abyss than anything else in Peter’s denial…. There are two kinds of denials: a denial with, and a denial without the oath. The two are not equally severe. When Simon Peter denies Jesus by means of an outright disclaimer, he has loosened his hold of Jesus’ soul. But when the oath is added, and the self-condemnation, then the basic concept of Christ’s office is also being rejected. The denial taken simply as a denial separates Peter from Jesus’ existence. But the denial accompanied by the oath is repudiation of the purpose of Christ’s existence, and a disavowal of the raison d’etre of the Christ.

At this point, almost immediately before being sent to Pilate, the Lord’s isolation from His friends and disciples reaches its ultimate point. He is not only abandoned, but abandoned with an oath.

Chapter 7: Remorse and Suicide of Judas the Betrayer

Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, “I

303 Klaas Schilder, Christ on Trial, 202, 207, 208.
have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.” And they said, “What is that to us? See thou to that.” And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself. And the chief priests took the silver pieces, and said, “It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood.” And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter’s field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore that field was called, the field of blood, unto this day. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him that was valued, whom they of the children of Israel did value; and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord appointed me.” (Mt. 27:3-10)

Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, the field of blood. (Acts 1:18-19)

After the brief early morning meeting of the Sanhedrin (see Mk. 15:1; Mt. 27:1; Lk. 22:66-71) where the verdict against Jesus is made official (The Jewish leaders ratified their condemnation of Christ after dawn to give their illegal night trial an air of legality), Judas learns that the Savior has been condemned to death. This knowledge causes Judas to change his mind (metameletheis, repented) regarding his treachery. As a result the betrayer strongly regrets what he has done, is filled with remorse and attempts to return the money he received for his wicked deed. The chief priests and leaders reject Judas’ offer because it was blood money. (Such money was contaminated and abhorrent to God [cf. Deut. 23:18] and could not be used as funds for the temple.) Therefore, the betrayer casts the money into the temple, departs and then hangs himself. Luke, in his account in the book of Acts, gives some gruesome details regarding the death of Judas that are not mentioned by Matthew. We can infer from Luke’s account that the rope either broke when he hanged himself or was cut by someone after he was already dead. As a result he likely landed on a sharp rock that caused his body to burst open at the abdomen and all his intestines spilled out.

The money that was cast into the temple was used by the chief priests to buy a potter’s field for the burial of strangers. That they would use the money for a charitable purpose indicates that they understood to a degree the evil nature of their deeds. The expression “potter’s field” indicates that the field had been used by potters to obtain their clay. Perhaps the good clay was exhausted and the land was put on the market by the owner or owners. This field became known by the people of Jerusalem as Hakeldama—“the field of blood” because it was purchased with blood money. Providentially its name stood as a testimony against the wicked deeds of Judas and the Sanhedrin. Some scholars believe that Acts 1:18 implies that the field derived its name because Judas committed suicide there with its bloody result. If this is the case then the expression “field of blood” would have a gruesome double meaning.

The account in Matthew regarding Judas and the purchase of the field is not repeated in any of the other gospel narratives. Matthew, writing to a predominately Jewish audience, included this account to emphasize the fulfillment of prophecy in these events. “Matthew’s main goal in the pericope is obviously the fulfillment quotation with which it ends. The pericope is shaped with this in mind from the start, i.e. in the reference to Judas’ return of thirty pieces of silver (v. 3) but also clearly in the deliberation of the chief priests and their purchase of the field (vv. 6-8).”

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304 Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14-20, 811.
In Matthew’s account the sorrow and suicide of Judas is placed only a few verses after the godly contrition of Peter. The apostle, writing under divine inspiration, wants to note the contrast between biblical repentance and an unregenerate, worldly sorrow that leads to death. The gospels anticipate this great difference by noting what Jesus does for Peter, yet fails to do for Judas. Christ prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail (Lk. 22:32). As a faithful High Priest the Savior interceded on Peter’s behalf so that his backsliding would only be temporary. Judas, on the other hand, receives no such treatment. Our Lord simply says, “Woe to that man by whom he is betrayed” (Lk. 22:22). Further, Jesus looked upon Peter immediately after his fall with love and concern coupled with the efficacious power of the Holy Spirit that brought the apostle to his right mind. For Judas there would be no loving gaze; he is a vessel of wrath prepared for destruction (Rom. 9:22). While both men are completely responsible for their actions, the ultimate difference between Peter’s genuine repentance and Judas’ apostasy is the decree of God, election and the Lord’s particular atonement. Peter did not apostatize because the Savior would not let him. Judas, however, was passed by. As we study the horrible end of Judas, there are a number of things that merit our attention.

(1) The Greek word which is used to describe Judas’ change of mind (metamelomai) is quite different from the other Greek verb translated repent (metanoeo) which is used to describe repentance unto salvation. “Metanoeo basically means to ‘change one’s mind.’ So it is properly translated ‘repent’ in most instances. It involves the intellect and will. Metamelomai has to do more with the emotions, and so does not indicate true biblical repentance.”305 Judas had a change of mind in that he was sorry after reflecting on the results of what he had done. He was filled with grief, anguish and perhaps even indignation for the consequences of his act. But his high degree of remorse did not involve a true understanding of the nature of sin or a commitment to return to Christ and seek forgiveness from God. Matthew uses metamelomai to emphasize the deep emotional aspect of Judas’ regret. When Peter became sorrowful his response was to pray to God and return to the disciples. In other words he turned from disobedience to obedience. Judas, on the other hand, murdered himself—a despicable act. Suicide was the pagan thing to do. “From a Greco-Roman perspective, suicide was the only honorable deed for one who betrayed his teacher.”306

Judas’ repentance was not for sin as committed against God and Christ, but for the consequences of sin. His sorrow did not spring from a love and fear of God as supremely holy, just, good and merciful as evangelical repentance does. Rather, it was more a foretaste of the regret that individuals suffer in hell. It was not a repentance that results from true saving faith, but rather a black, terrifying despair. It was a humanistic, worldly repentance that did not look to Christ for redemption, but instead wallowed in self-pity and a tortured conscience. There is nothing noble or virtuous in the world’s repentance, for it seeks relief not in Christ but in death. As Paul says, “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Cor. 7:1). The apostle says that there is godly sorrow, which acknowledges God and his commandments, which sorrows over God’s broken law and the dishonor to His throne and turns to a new obedience. And there is worldly sorrow which works out its fulfillment in death. Hughes writes,

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The sorrow of the world, indeed, is not something distinct from sin; on the contrary, it partakes of the very essence of sin. It is not sorrow because of the heinousness of sin as
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rebellion against God, but sorrow because of the painful and unwelcome consequences of sin. Self is its central point; and self is also the central point of sin. Thus the sorrow of the world may be very bitter and intense, like that of Esau who sorrowed with many tears over his lost birthright but found no place of repentance (Heb. 12:16f.). David also suffered extreme sorrow because of his sin, but his sorrow was directed to God in deep penitence. Acknowledging his guilt and unworthiness, he cried to God for forgiveness: “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin; for I acknowledge my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned…” (Psa. 51:2ff.). His was truly godly sorrow—centred in God and His holiness. And such godly sorrow is transmuted into godly joy—the joy of God’s salvation and the praise of His goodness (Psa. 51:12ff.). The sorrow of the world, on the other hand, culminates in the weeping and gnashing of teeth of judgment (Mt. 13:42, 50; 25:30); it earns the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23).

(2) Judas’ wickedness is confirmed by his confession to the chief priests. Judas admits that Jesus was completely innocent. “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood” (Mt. 27:4). The betrayer had spent almost every hour of every day with the Savior for over three years. He had seen the Master’s miracles; observed His many good works; watched the Messiah’s impeccable behavior; and, heard His perfect doctrines. If anyone could have pinned sinful words or deeds on Christ, it would have been Judas. Yet Judas admits before the chief priests that Jesus is completely innocent of any wrong. David Brown writes,

What a testimony this is to Jesus! Judas…post, as treasurer to Him and the Twelve (John xii. 6), gave him peculiar opportunity of watching the spirit, disposition, and habits of his Master; while his covetous nature and thievish practices would incline him to dark and suspicious, rather than frank and generous, interpretations of all that He said and did. If then, he could have fastened on one questionable feature in all that he had so long witnessed, we may be sure that no such speech as this would ever have escaped his lips, nor would he have been so stung with remorse as not to be able to keep the money and survive his crime.

This confession proves that Judas had betrayed the Savior with wicked motives and that the Master was truly the Messiah—the sinless Son of God. It also demonstrates that people can know the truth about our Lord, but not trust in Him for salvation or commit themselves to His cause. There are many people in the United States that know the truth regarding Jesus, yet do not

307 Philip E. Hughes, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 272-273. Calvin writes, “True repentance is displeasure at sin, arising out of fear and reverence for God, and producing, at the same time, a love and desire of righteousness. Wicked men are far from such a feeling; for they would desire to sin without intermission, and even, as far as lies in their power, they endeavor to deceive both God and their own conscience; but notwithstanding their reluctance and opposition, they are tormented with blind horror by their conscience, so that, though they do not hate their sin, still they feel, with sorrow and distress, that it presses heavily and painfully upon them. This is the reason why their grief is useless; for they do not cheerfully turn to God, or even aim at doing better, but, being attached to their wicked desires, they pine away in torment, which they cannot escape. In this way, as I have just said, God punishes their obstinacy; for although his elect are drawn to him by severe chastisements, and as it were contrary to their will, yet he heals in due time the wounds which he has inflicted, so that they come cheerfully to him, by whose hand they acknowledge that they are struck, and by whose wrath they are alarmed. The former, therefore, while they have no hatred to sin, not only dread, but fly from the judgment of God, and thus, having received an incurable wound, they perish in the midst of their sorrows” (Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, 3:269).

act upon it. Knowledge of the Savior without trust and confession will only increase one’s guilt on the day of judgment.

Note also that Judas’ confession is deficient and humanistic. The betrayer does not confess his sins to God or Christ but to wicked unbelievers, the enemies of the Messiah. People that do not believe in Jesus do not flee to His mercy to deal with their guilt; but rather look to useless men who have no real ability to soothe a guilty conscience. In our anti-Christian culture people seek solutions for guilt in drugs (e.g., Valium, Prozac, Marijuana, LSD, etc), therapy (secular counseling, psychology, scientology), good works (e.g., help in a soup kitchen), drunkenness, and various false religions or philosophies. All non-Christian systems have certain things in common when it comes to the problem of guilt. Guilt is either denied by an attempt to evade individual responsibility (much of politics and counseling follows this methodology); or, people seek to ignore guilt by sending it into oblivion through drugs, alcohol or suicide. The Bible alone deals with guilt head on by the sacrificial death of Christ. One must accept individual responsibility for one’s own sin and guilt and one must trust in the sacrificial death of Jesus, trusting that all of one’s guilt is imputed to Him on the cross. When we confess, we must confess our sins to God through Christ saying, “I have sinned, Father, against heaven, forgive my sins on account of Your precious Son and His perfect, vicarious sacrifice.”

(3) Judas’ confession was mocked and dismissed by the chief priests. They said, “What is that to us? You see to it!” (Mt. 27:4). Because of psychological pain, Judas seeks relief for his guilty conscience by confessing to the chief priests and giving their money back. The Sanhedrin, however, couldn’t care less about Judas’ predicament. They used him to get at the Messiah and they didn’t really care whether Jesus was innocent or guilty. They in essence laugh at Judas’ guilt and misery. “The chief priests and elders had no more pity for Judas than they had for Jesus; no remorse troubled them, they had secured the Savior, and they cared nothing for any of the consequences of their action. As for the traitor, he had made his bargain, and he must abide by it.”

Judas was wicked, yet his conscience was awakened after the dirty deed was done. The Sanhedrin reveals an even greater depth of evil and carelessness regarding sin. The fact that they had thirsted for Jesus’ blood, and hired Judas with a bribe to betray Him meant nothing to these reprobates. The fact that they had unjustly condemned the Prince of Life to be tortured and hung on a cross meant nothing to them. “Thus do fools make a mock[ery] at sin, as if no harm was done, no hazard run, by the commission of the greatest wickedness.” By way of application, what does this light treatment of sin say about our culture where Christ crucified is the subject of jokes and coarse jesting on television and in the movies? The person and work of Christ is fair game in our culture for every conceivable blasphemy and outrage (e.g., The Last Temptation of Christ, The Da Vinci Code, etc).

The reaction of the chief priest to Judas’ predicament ought to stand as a warning to everyone who keeps company with wicked men or who participates in their sinful deeds. There is no genuine biblical love among the wicked, only self-interest. When a person is popular he is loved by the crowd, but when he is down his so-called friends scatter. The Sanhedrin was glad to make use of Judas for their sinful interests. They were very happy to see him. They were very friendly toward him with smiles and gifts. But now that he was not needed and was in despair, he meant nothing to them. Such is the way of the world where relationships are built on self-interests, lusts and sin. Men use women and women use men. When marriage becomes boring,

310 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:412-413.
spouses are cast off for new, sinful experiences. The Sanhedrin is a reflection of this wicked world. The community and fellowship of the “in-crowd,” the Beatniks, the hippies and the counter-culture were not rooted in biblical love which is founded upon biblical law, but rather upon selfishness, lust and sin.

The Sanhedrin was not concerned with Judas’s sin even though they were chief participants in it. Professing Christians need to understand that doing anything to support sin (no matter how small or supposedly insignificant) is itself sinful. Believers should not be supporting wicked institutions and organizations with their money. If a company strongly supports abortion on demand and sodomite rights (e.g., Hollywood, Disney Corp., etc), or has a large side business in pornography (e.g., AT&T, General Motors, etc), Christians must avoid their products.

(4) Judas’ actions resulted in the purchase of the potter’s field by the chief priests, which is a fulfillment of prophecy. “Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, and they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, and gave them for the potter’s field, as the LORD directed me”(Mt. 27:9-10).

Although Matthew mentions only Jeremiah, the prophecy is an allusion to Zechariah 11:12-13: “Then I said to them, ‘If it is agreeable to you, give me my wages; and if not refrain.’ So they weighed out for my wages thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter’—that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD for the potter.” It also refers to Jeremiah 19:1-13. Regarding Jeremiah 19 Hendriksen writes, “Note all the resemblances: Judah and Jerusalem have shed innocent blood (Jer. 19:4; Matt. 27:3, 6, 7). Chief priests and elders are mentioned prominently (Jer. 19:1; Matt. 27:3, 6, 7). A potter is mentioned (Jer. 19:1, 11; Matt. 27:7, 10). Tophet, that is, the valley of Hinnom—the very valley where—to the heart of Judah and Jerusalem. The very valley where Chief priests and elders are mentioned prominently (Jer. 19:1; Matt. 27:3, 6, 7). Tophet, that is, the valley of Hinnom—the very valley where, according to tradition, the Potter’s field was located—has its name changed to ‘the Valley of Slaughter,’ which is about the same as ‘the Field of Blood’ (Jer. 19:6; Matt. 27:8; cf. Acts 1:19). And this valley became a well-known ‘burial place’ (Jer. 19:11; Matt. 27:7).”311 We must remember that if Mark or Matthew would allude to two prophets, one a major and the other a minor prophet, then sometimes only the major prophet is mentioned (e.g., see Mk. 1:2-3 where Mark ascribes prophecies from Malachi and Isaiah to Isaiah alone).

Matthew is doing two things by the allusion to these prophecies. First, he is demonstrating that God’s sovereign plan regarding the Messiah has been carried out. That is, Jesus perfectly fulfills the Old Testament prophecies. Therefore, to deny Christ is to deny the authority of the Holy Scriptures. Second, the allusion to Jeremiah 19 ought to strike terror into the hearts of those who have rejected and murdered Jesus because of this chapter’s horrifying description of God’s judgment upon Judah. “’The priests,’ says Hengstenberg, ‘removed the gold, as unclean, out of the temple, and purchased with it a mean spot in that very valley, which,

311 William Hendriksen, The Gospel of Matthew, 948. There are a number of theories as to why Matthew says Jeremiah when the main passage in view is in from Zechariah. Perhaps the best view, other than the one mentioned above, is that among the Jews the sacred writings were divided into three parts: the law, the prophets and the writings. According to the Talmudic tradition the prophets were divided into two sections. The section that contained Jeremiah and Zechariah began with the book of Jeremiah. Therefore, if Matthew was using a scroll that contained Zechariah, the scroll would say Jeremiah on its cover. Therefore, to a first century Jew a quotation from Jeremiah could refer to any prophet in that scroll.

Whatever theory one adheres to, one thing is certain. Matthew was not uninformed about the Old Testament Scriptures. He would not have made such an obvious mistake. And even if he did, it would have been corrected in his own lifetime. Further, given the doctrine of inspiration, it is impossible for Matthew to be in error.
at an earlier period, had been polluted by innocent blood, and had brought upon Jerusalem the
vengeance of the Lord.”

Judah and Jerusalem will fall by the sword (19:7) and become like Tophet, the place for the dead (19:12). Because of what the Sanhedrin did to the Messiah, the whole nation will become a “valley of slaughter,” “a field of blood.” The chief priests’ joy as a result of their delivering up the Savior will be turned into dread, shock, horror and despair.

Chapter 8: The Civil Trial of Christ—Jesus before Pilate

Then led they Jesus from Caiaphas unto the hall of judgment: and it was early; and they
themselves went not into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat
the passover. Pilate then went out unto them, and said, “What accusation bring ye against this
man?” They answered and said unto him, “If he were not a malefactor, we would not have
delivered him up unto thee.” Then said Pilate unto them, “Take ye him, and judge him
according to your law.” The Jews therefore said unto him, “It is not lawful for us to put any man
to death:” That the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled, which he spake, signifying what death he
should die. Then Pilate entered into the judgment hall again, and called Jesus, and said unto
him, “Art thou the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered him, “Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or
did others tell it thee of me?” Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief
priests have delivered thee unto me: what hast thou done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not
of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not
be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.” Pilate therefore said unto
him, “Art thou a king then?” Jesus answered, “Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I
born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every
one that is of the truth heareth my voice.” Pilate saith unto him, “What is truth?” And when he
had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, “I find in him no fault at
all.” (John 18:28-38)

And the whole multitude of them arose, and led him unto Pilate. And they began to accuse him,
saying, “We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar,
saying that he himself is Christ a King.” And Pilate asked him, saying, “Art thou the King of the
Jews?” And he answered him and said, “Thou sayest it.” Then said Pilate to the chief priests
and to the people, “I find no fault in this man.” (Luke 23:1-4)

Introduction

With the ecclesiastical trial of Jesus complete, the Jews turn the Savior over to Pontius
Pilate, the prefect or governor over the Jews, “early” (Jn. 18:28) in the morning. (The Jewish trial
occurred from approximately 1am to 3am. It was ratified, reconfirmed or made official at
sunrise. Since Roman officials conducted their business very early in the day and since the
Sanhedrin wanted the Savior killed immediately, they likely arrived at the governor’s residence
by 7am.) Our Lord is taken to the governor’s palace or Praetorium. Scholars are divided
regarding where Pilate was staying at this time. Many insist that he was living in the palace of
Herod located in the northwest section of the city. “Josephus states explicitly that the procurator,
Gessius Florus, lived there and held court on the public square in front of the building (War

312 E. W. Hengstenberg, Christology of the Old Testament as quoted in James Morison, 575.
II.xiv.8, xv.5). That this was true of Pilate as well may be deduced from the information that he had gilded votive tablets bearing Tiberius’ name erected in the royal palace (Philo, *Legation to Gaius* 15:16). Mark locates the Roman trial of Jesus in ‘the praetorium’ (Ch. 15:16), which in this context can only mean the official residence of the governor. Others argue that Jesus was taken to the fortress of Antonia because Pilate did have a residence there to be near the garrison at crucial times (Mk. 15:16); people had to ascend in order to see Pilate (Mk. 15:8); and, the mention of the large stone platform called “the Pavement” (Jn. 19:13). “This Pavement is supposed to have been between the fortress Antonia and the western portico of the temple.”

The Roman historian Suetonius notes that Julius Caesar had “pieces of marble ready fitted that they might be laid down at any place, and the judgment seat be placed upon them.” So, the pavement could have been at Herod’s palace. Therefore, the exact place of the trial cannot be proven conclusively. In any case, what is important is what took place at this trial.

Of all the gospel accounts, John contains the most detailed examination of this trial. While all four gospels have Pilate asking Jesus “Are You the King of the Jews?” (Mk. 15:9; Mt. 27:11; Lk. 23:3; Jn. 18:33), John tells us what occurred before this question; that is, the interaction outside the palace between Pilate and the Jewish leaders. (Luke’s account, however, does give us the three specific charges leveled against Christ by the Sanhedrin [Lk. 23:2]). Also, while all the synoptic gospels have our Lord’s affirmative answer to Pilate regarding His kingship, only John has the interaction between Pilate and the Lord after this affirmation where Christ explains the nature of His kingdom and the purpose of His coming. We can be thankful that John was inspired by the Holy Spirit to give us such crucial details regarding the civil trial of our Lord. As we look at this trial, there are a number of important areas to consider.

(1) We need to consider the Roman governor Pontius Pilate and his behavior at the trial of Jesus. Pilate is important not merely for his role in condemning Jesus to death, but also because he ties the gospel of Christ so concretely to history. One of the earliest creeds—the Apostle’s Creed—says, “Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried…” The gospel involves not only a particular view of a person or a philosophy, but also a belief that certain events actually occurred in history. That Pilate was a real historical figure no one can reasonably doubt. Not only is he mentioned in the New Testament, which is inspired and inerrant (2 Tim. 3:16), he also is discussed in secular histories: Josephus (*Antiqu. and War*) and Philo of Alexandria (*Legitio ad Gaium*). Further, in 1961 a stone tablet was discovered at Caesarea, which in Latin bears the names of Pontius Pilate and Tiberius. Regarding Pilate’s career J. G. Vos writes,

Pilate was the fifth Rom. procurator of Judea, appointed c. A.D. 26 by the emperor Tiberius to replace Valerius Gratus. He brought his wife to Judea with him. Pilate’s area of jurisdiction

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315 Ibid, 531.
316 Modern pilgrims to Jerusalem who retrace the steps of Jesus from the “Pavement” to what people regard as “Golgotha” begin at the area of the Tower of Antonia, which is the traditional site of the trial and Pilate’s famous words “Behold the man!” There is an arch at this site called the Ecce Homo Arch.
317 The Apostles’ Creed is an early product of the post-apostolic Western Church. It likely was an early baptismal confession. The earliest written versions are the Latin text from Rufinus (A.D. 390) and the Greek version from Marcellus of Ancyra (A.D. 336-341). “The Greek text is usually regarded as a translation, but is probably older than the Latin, and may date from the second century, when the Greek language prevailed in the Roman congregation” (Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes* [Grand Rapids: Baker, (1931) 1983], 1:19). The received form that most churches use today dates from the seventh or eighth centuries.
was Samaria, Judea, i.e. the former kingdom of Archelaus, and the area S as far as Gaza and the Dead Sea. His functions combined military and administrative responsibilities. His immediate superior was the Rom. governor of Syria, but the actual nature of the relationship is unknown. Pilate’s authority over all persons in his area except Rom. citizens was virtually absolute. On the other hand, the Jews were granted a degree of liberty and self-government. The Sanhedrin at Jerusalem possessed various judicial functions, but death sentences could not be carried out until confirmed by the Rom. procurator. Because of political and religious problems, Judea, from the Rom. point of view, was a difficult province to govern. Pilate outraged the Jews by sending soldiers into Jerusalem with Rom. military standards bearing emblems that the Jews regarded as idolatrous. This had been attempted before, and the Jewish opposition was so strong that the Rom. authorities removed the offensive insignia from standards that were carried into the city of Jerusalem. When Pilate reversed this policy he met with determined Jewish resistance, which he sought to overcome by threatening to kill the objectors. Finding them adamant in their opposition and not afraid to die, Pilate finally had to yield the point. This incident reveals poor judgment, stubbornness, and finally weakness on Pilate’s part. Pilate further outraged the Jews by appropriating the *corban* money, or religious contributions from the Temple treasury, to finance the construction of an aqueduct, some twenty-five m. in length, to bring water to Jerusalem from the highlands S of the city. The Jews considered this action sacrilegious and reacted violently. Many rioters were killed by Pilate’s soldiers. This may be the atrocity mentioned in Luke 13:1, 2.318

Given the rather brutal reputation of Pilate among the Jews and even secular historians, a question that has been raised by various scholars regarding Pilate is: why does he appear so fair-minded regarding Jesus and so determined to let Him go free? Pilate not only is uncooperative with the Jewish leaders who at first expect him to essentially rubber stamp their verdict (Jn. 18:30), but also declares Christ to be innocent of any wrong on three separate occasions (Jn. 18:38; 19:4, 6).

The answer to this question is threefold. First, Pilate may have been impressed by the demeanor of the Savior. The Lord’s dignity, courage, confidence and calmness before Pilate were exceptional. Second, Pilate was not ignorant of the corruptions of the Sanhedrin. As a governor in a problematic part of the empire, he had spies and informers and may have known that the case against the Savior was unjust.319 Further, his questioning of the Messiah revealed to him that the Nazarene was not a threat to the Roman Empire. Third, an important factor in the midst of the trial was his wife’s warning found only in Matthew 27:19: “Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him.” To a pagan

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319 Samuel J. Andrews’ discussion of Pilate is helpful: “What accusation bring ye against this man?” Whether Pilate asked this question from a sense of justice, not thinking it right to condemn any man to death without knowing his offense; or whether he already knew who the prisoner was, and that He had been condemned upon ecclesiastical grounds, we cannot determine. We can scarce doubt, however, that he had some knowledge of Jesus, of his teaching, works, and character. Without troubling himself about ecclesiastical questions, he would closely watch all popular movements; and he could not overlook a man who had excited so much of public attention. If, as is most probable, he was in Jerusalem at the time of the Lord’s public entry, he must have heard how He was hailed by the multitude as King of the Jews; and the fact that he placed a part of the Roman cohort at the disposal of the priests when about to arrest Him, shows that they must have communicated to him their design. Some, however, think that Pilate would not have asked them the question about the nature of His offense, if he had the evening before placed his soldiers at their service to aid in the arrest. (See Baumlein on John xviii. 3.) It is possible that this was the act of the commander of the cohort without the knowledge of Pilate. But, however this may have been, it is plain that he was by no means disposed to be a mere tool in the hands of the priests and elders to execute their revengeful plans.” (*The Life of Our Lord upon the Earth*, 531-532)
Roman, who was no doubt very superstitious, such a warning would have been frightening. For these reasons, Pilate did virtually everything he could to avoid being the one responsible for the execution of Christ; from his repeated declaration of Jesus’ innocence, to his passing the buck to Herod, to his desperate move to have a prisoner released to the Jews. He even chose Barabbas, a wicked criminal, to place next to Jesus, thinking the Jews would let Jesus go.

But, tragically for Pilate, he gave in to the majority of Jews who wanted their Messiah crucified. He handed the Savior over to crucifixion, not knowing that his name would forever be tied to this despicable, cowardly deed. Pilate ultimately was not interested in truth or justice, but rather with pleasing his constituents and his taskmaster, Caesar. This incident is a strong indictment against raw democracy, where the voice of the majority takes precedence over the rule of law. Indeed, Pilate reminds one of modern American politicians who have no Christian religious principles or ethical absolutes whatsoever. For them, the voice of the people is the voice of God. When civil magistrates follow the mob instead of God’s law-Word, the state progressively becomes a terror to righteous people. Democracy has always resulted in anarchy followed by totalitarianism; for, given the choice between anarchy and a strong man, people choose the dictator. In a Christian constitutional democracy the law of God is king. In that system there is a genuine rule of law and only Christian citizens who are covenant heads and property owners can vote, serve on juries, hold political office or serve as judges. Under such rule people have great liberty from men like Pilate; for the laws of Scripture protect them from arbitrary, pragmatic leadership whose best intentions usually result in savage oppression.

(2) Let us note the gross religious hypocrisy of our Lord’s enemies. John’s account says that the members of the Sanhedrin who accompanied the Savior to Pilate’s residence “did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover” (18:28). Although no one is sure why the Jews regarded entering a Gentile’s house as a cause of uncleanness, scholars believe that the most likely reason was the belief that abortions occurred there and that dead babies were buried under the floors of their houses. Thus to enter such a house would be equivalent to coming in contact with a corpse. According to Numbers 9:6-12, a person who was defiled by a human corpse “could not keep the Passover on that day” (v. 6). He would have to wait until “the fourteenth day of the second month” (v. 10).

What makes the incident so absurd and ironic is the fact that the chief priests are scrupulous regarding even the slightest possibility that a violation of the ceremonial law might occur, even though they have just condemned an innocent, sinless Man to death. “[T]hey hold fast to the ceremonial law while they seek the execution of the promised Deliverer of Israel, the Son of God and Savior; and in their zeal to eat the passover lamb they unwittingly help to fulfill its significance through demanding the death of the Lamb of God…” These wicked reprobates were engaged in the most despicable act in all human history, yet they were concerned about a non-moral offense, a ceremonial regulation regarding defilement. The spiritual blindness and hard-heartedness of the wicked is astounding! Regarding these same men our Lord said, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel…you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Mt. 23:23, 24, 28). “These ‘rulers of the Jews’ and the multitude that followed them were thoroughly Ritualists. It was their ritualism that urged them on to crucify the son of

321 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 327-328.
God. Christ and ritualism are opposed to each other as light is to darkness. The true Cross in which Paul gloriﬁed and the cross in which modern ceremonialists glory, have no resemblance to each other. The Cross and the cruciﬁx cannot agree. Either ritualism will banish Christ or Christ will banish ritualism.”

The ability of unregenerate professors of religion to deceive themselves regarding the state of their souls is amazing and perplexing. There are adulterers, sex perverts, murderers, homosexuals, criminals, thieves and so on who are scrupulous about taking part in the rituals and external ceremonies of their communions. One can go to church and see sodomites, who the night before were engaged in unspeakable perversions, walking up to the front of the church to take the eucharist. There are members of the mafia who are thieves, extortionists and murderers that have their children baptized, go to communion and even go to confession regularly. During the Crusades, the very same men who prayed to the virgin Mary, worshipped relics, fasted and carried religious banners into battle raped, pillaged and kept prostitutes. What do men do when deep down they know they are not right with God, yet are unwilling to repent of sin and look solely to Christ? They seek refuge in pomp, ritual and the external matters of religion.

Evangelicals are not immune from external ceremonies without true heart religion. They have their own man-made rituals from the altar call (an invention of the Pelagian heretic Charles Grandison Finney) to being slain in the Spirit, to the rote prayer of asking Jesus to live inside one’s heart. They have their laughing revivals, prophecy conferences and such. Yet where is the preaching of the gospel, the concern for sanctification and a thirst for righteousness? Although modern American evangelicalism is not ritualistic in the traditional sense (e.g., Romanism, high church Episcopalianism, Eastern Orthodoxy), nevertheless the gospel and biblical worship have been obscured and superseded by all sorts of gimmicks and church growth techniques. How many evangelicals in America can recite the Ten Commandments? How many churchgoers can deﬁne terms such as atonement, propitiation, justiﬁcation, sanctiﬁcation and adoption? While many professing Christians today are very concerned about the use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages, they often are not concerned about keeping the Sabbath, having honest business practices, placing their children in satanic state schools and other important matters. “That religion is worth little which does not make us say, ‘I esteem all Thy commandments concerning all things to be right, and I hate every false way.’ (Ps. cxix.128)”

Today in a number of “reformed” denominations there is a growing movement back toward Rome and medieval high-church liturgical practices. There is the Federal Vision heresy which thinks that matters of daily holiness and separation from the world can be solved by “looking to one’s baptism” and by believing that faith and good works are essentially the same thing. Any religion which takes our eyes off of Jesus Christ and His perfect righteousness to focus our attention on sacraments, ceremonies, robes and vestments, and rote repetitions must be viewed as a close relative to Pharisaical religion and Romanism. “It may be accompanied by immense zeal and show of earnestness, but it is not sound in the sight of God…. That Christianity is worthless which makes us compound for the neglect of heart religion and practical holiness, by an extravagant zeal for man made ceremonies or outward forms.”

(3) The Sanhedrin knew that Pilate would not sentence Jesus to death for the charge of blasphemy so they contrived a plan to convince Pilate that this Man needed to be cruciﬁed. This happened in three stages.

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First, the Jews came to Pilate “and said to Him, if He were not an evil doer, we would not have delivered Him up to you” (Jn. 18:30). In other words, “This man is a dangerous wicked, habitual criminal that we have already convicted. Therefore, we have brought Him here for you to punish.” The council, who came out in a large contingent to impress Pilate, was asking him to trust them and rubber stamp their conviction. They did not want Pilate to ask any questions or go into any details because they knew their case was based on lies and distortions. “Look, Pilate, we are the highest court in this nation. Therefore, you should trust our decision and carry out this execution.”

Interestingly, the accusation made by the Sanhedrin to Pilate is quite contrary to what the Savior was convicted with at His ecclesiastical trial. Christ was convicted not for committing any evil acts but for His words—his claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God. But, here, before Pilate, now our Lord is said to be a malefactor, a criminal, a habitual doer of evil.325 These wicked liars knew that Pilate would not be concerned about what a man taught, or about fine points of theology. Therefore, they came up with this completely new and false accusation. The sinless Son of God is accused of being a wicked man who not only continuously wallows in sin, but also commits sins that are crimes, crimes even worthy of death. What wickedness!

Pilate’s reply to this request indicates that he was not yet aware of their plan to put Jesus to death. Therefore, Pilate essentially says, “Well, if you think he is a bad criminal then go ahead deal with it according to your law.” His answer indicates that Pilate was not impressed by their accusations and was perhaps even annoyed. It also indicates that he does not trust or respect the Jewish leaders. Pilate is putting the Jewish leaders in their place and demonstrating who has the real authority in Israel. Pilate’s response was not only disappointing, but also humiliating. Pilate essentially said, “Either bring me a formal accusation according to Roman law or get out of my court and stop wasting my time.” Pilate knew that the Sanhedrin was corrupt and he held them in contempt. “He knew that through envy they had brought Jesus unto him, and he loathed the hypocrites as he heard the wretched syllables sibilating from their sanctimonious lips.”326

As a result of Pilate’s somewhat harsh response, the Jews explain why they have come to him, “Therefore the Jews said to him, ‘It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death’” (Jn. 18:31). Then John adds this inspired commentary: “that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke signifying by what death He would die” (Jn. 18:32). The Sanhedrin by its answer makes it very clear to Pilate that they want nothing less than capital punishment. As students of the law the chief priests knew that death by crucifixion involved a special curse “for he who is hanged is accursed by God” (Dt. 21:23). The Jewish council wanted death by crucifixion as a method of discrediting the Savior before the people. Our Lord, however, had prophesied this event as the manner in which He would take away the sin of the world. “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself” (Jn. 12:32). “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:14-15). Christ’s most explicit prediction of His coming death is found in Matthew 20:18-19: “The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him up to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.” In John 18:32 we see that not one word of Jesus can ever lack fulfillment and also how God uses even the plot of His devilish enemies to carry out His sovereign plan of redemption.

Second, because of Pilate’s uncooperative response the Jewish leaders come up with more formal and detailed accusations. These accusations are recorded in Luke’s gospel. “And they began to accuse Him, saying, ‘We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King’” (23:2). The verb katagorein, “‘to accuse,’ is a technical legal term for bringing charges in court against someone.” 327 The term “means brought charges as in Acts 22:30; 24:2-21; 25:5-22.” 328 There are three parts to their charges.

a) The first accusation is very general and is likely used to introduce the following more specific charges. They accuse Jesus of “perverting the nation.” Our Lord used this word in Luke 9:41 to describe the moral deviancy of the Jewish nation. In Acts 23:9 and 26:31 the word “pervert” (diastrephein) is used to describe men who seduce people away from true Christian doctrine. The same word is used in the LXX (1 Kg. 18:17, 18) when Ahab accused Elijah of being a “perverter” of Israel. That is, Elijah, by his prophecies against Ahab, was destroying people’s respect and dedication to Ahab’s authority. Here the term is used in a political sense. The Sanhedrin is accusing Christ of leading the Jewish nation away from their proper loyalty to the Roman Empire. They are saying that the Nazarene is a political subversive, a revolutionary, an agitator, a major troublemaker for Rome. The next two charges are meant to exemplify how the accused is causing trouble.

b) Our Lord is accused with “forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar.” 329 This accusation is particularly dishonest in that earlier the same enemies of Jesus had sent spies to test the Savior asking, “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (Lk. 20:22). These men knew that their charge was utterly false for our Lord had said, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Lk. 20:25). These men knew that Christ had preached peace and not sedition. They knew that He lived a life of humble submission and not rebellion. The Savior was a meek and lowly servant of the people and not a rabble-rousing revolutionary leader. The chief priests’ hatred of the Messiah was so strong that suddenly they became great patriots of heathen, idolatrous Rome. They wanted the Son of David executed for supposedly expressing some anti-Roman sentiments. Pilate knew something was wrong—that these men were filthy liars.

329 Knowing their own recent history, the Jews believed that the tax issue would be a sore spot with the Roman authorities. Klaas Schilder writes, “At the time when Jesus was still a lad, at about the time when He was first allowed to accompany His parents in their pilgrimages to the temple, a great tumult had arisen among the Jews. It had been caused by the appearance of a certain ‘Judas the Galilean, the son of Ezechias.’ This Judas, of whom we read also in Acts 5:37, had become the leader of a rebellion caused by a refusal to pay taxes at the time when Quirinius had taken over the registration in the province of Galilee in the interest of the Roman government. This Judas of Galilee had put himself at the head of those rebelling against taxation, had recruited a large company in the neighborhood of Sephoris in Galilee, had armed his followers with munitions taken from the royal arsenal, and had, in short, put the whole of Galilee into a state of tumult. It was said, in fact, that he had wanted to be made king. In this revolution a well-known Pharisee whose name was Sadduk had been his accomplice. By an appeal to the religion of the forefathers and to Israel’s immemorial messianic expectations, these two had preached the revolution. True, their ‘success’ had been a meager one. The movement was soon smothered in blood. Nevertheless, their brief effort had left a deep impression upon the people. Hence it was no wonder that Roman authority, after those turbulent days, had kept an even sharper eye open for every religiously motivated agitation which in its effect might prove to be a threat to the government. Indeed, there was good reason for caution in this matter. The rebellion of the Galilean Judas had even served as an impetus to the formation of a new party, a group which aligned itself with the Pharisees—the so-called party of Zealots. These were committed to a program of abandoning the current laissez-faire policy in favor of active rebellion against the despised Roman authority” (Christ on Trial, 323-324).
c) The main and most serious charge was that Jesus said that “He Himself is Christ a King” (Lk. 22:2). “This charge, if proved, would have exposed him to inevitable death, for never were prosecutions for treason more severe than under the reign of Tiberius. A charge of high treason, says Tacitus, was, at that time, an accumulation of all (possible) charges.” The Jews in this accusation are falsely imputing to the Savior their own political and military expectations of the Messiah. Thus, on the one hand their accusation is true: Jesus is the anointed One—the King of Israel. But, on the other hand, the accusation is totally false in the Jewish political-military sense.

Even in this charge the Sanhedrin is lying, for they know that Christ never taught or claimed a kingship in the carnal, earthly sense. After the Savior fed the multitude, “when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone” (Jn. 6:15). In Luke’s gospel when a man from the crowd asked the Lord to make a ruling on his behalf regarding his brother’s inheritance money Christ said to him, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?” (12:14). When the chief priests, temple guards and Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus, He did the exact opposite of what an earthly king or revolutionary would do. He demanded that Peter put his sword into its sheath (Jn. 18:11; Mt. 26:52) and even healed the ear that Peter had wounded (Lk. 22:51). If Christ had been a carnal, earthly king as the Jews were asserting, then why did He command His servants to never resist or interfere with the reigning powers? Why did He order His disciples to carry the Roman soldiers’ gear two miles when they were only compelled to go one mile (Mt. 5:41)? Why is there not one example in any of the gospels (with the one exception of Peter who our Lord rebuked) or the whole New Testament of the Savior’s followers taking up arms against the state? Yes, Jesus was a King. But He never claimed the type of kingdom or worldly dominion that the Jews were attributing to Him. For over three years throughout the nation of Israel, Christ had preached peace, humility, love and a leadership of humble service. His kingdom was not based on military power, revolution or political confrontation, but on the righteousness of God and the peace of salvation. The truth is that “nothing tends more to make men good subjects than making them Christ’s faithful followers.”

The Examination

After the Jewish leaders present their case to the governor, Pilate, because of the serious nature of the charges, must examine Jesus. Therefore, leaving the members of the Sanhedrin behind, he goes into his palace to interrogate Christ. “The trial of Jesus before the governor thus is played out like a drama on two stages, front and back,” with Pilate going back and forth between our Lord and His enemies. What this means is that the Sanhedrin does not hear what the Savior says to Pilate. The profound revelations regarding His kingdom and mission are only spoken to the Roman governor.

When Pilate examines Christ he completely ignores the first two accusations and focuses on the most serious charge: the kingship of Jesus. The governor’s first question to the Savior—“Are You the King of the Jews?”—is recorded in all four gospels (Mk. 15:2; Mt. 27:11; Lk.

331 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:821.
332 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 328.
23:3; Jn. 18:33). Pilate uses “the emphatic personal pronoun su as had Caiaphas in 14:61: ‘Are you the Messiah…?’ The emphatic pronoun carries with it a touch of mockery, perhaps suggesting that Pilate had anticipated meeting someone more impressive (i.e. ‘You? You must be kidding!’”333 The Savior standing before Pilate in bonds, with His face swollen and bleeding from the beating He received, with His clothes stained with blood, sweat and the spit from His enemies did not look at all like a king to Pilate. How could Pilate (a powerful Roman magistrate with soldiers under his charge, his luxurious palace, his magnificent clothing and his wealth) believe that the poor, beaten, bound and humiliated man before him is a king? To Pilate such a scenario was utterly absurd.

Further, why would the Jewish people bring their own king before the Roman prefect to be executed? Pilate knew that the Jews hated their subjugation under Rome; they would never treat their leader in such a rough manner. If this Nazarene was a revolutionary leader who was a serious threat to Rome, then he must be regarded as a colossal failure for where were His followers and defenders? Why are the leaders of the people seeking His death? How could a man who was bound, beaten and delivered up by His own people be the one who would cause these very same people to rebel against Rome? The governor knew that nothing in this scenario made any sense whatsoever. But, in order to protect himself from the Jews and his superiors, Pilate had to continue the trial.

The three synoptic gospels ignore the interaction between our Lord and Pilate immediately after this question and go directly to the main point of Jesus’ answer: “It is as you say” (Mt. 27:11; Mk. 15:2; Lk. 23:3). Christ’s answer, “You say [so]” (su legeis), is an indirect affirmation. Our Lord is not being evasive with this answer; rather he is implying that Pilate does understand the kind of king that He is. To paraphrase, “That is what you are saying, however I have not been advertising this truth.” “Jesus does not deny the identification, for he is indeed the ‘King of the Jews,’ but it is not his preferred self-designation.”334

The gospel of John, which presupposes our knowledge of the synoptic gospels, gives us Christ’s full reply. There are three aspects to our Lord’s response.

First, the Savior wants to know if the question originated from Pilate’s own concerns, or if he was being influenced by others. “Jesus answered him, ‘Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?’” (Jn. 18:34). “Jesus wants to know whether Pilate has any insight of his own which he can lead on to further understanding”335 or if he merely received the complaints of the Jewish leaders which are distorted and prejudicial. Christ’s response to Pilate’s query was not an attempt to avoid the truth, but was a means to clarify the situation and appeal to Pilate’s conscience. “It was designed to excite within him distrust of the Jews’ accusations.”336 If Jesus had been a king in the sense that the Jews presented to Pilate, then why does Pilate, a prefect with informers, soldiers and spies, need to be informed about it by the Jews? Obviously, if our Lord was an insurrectionist Pilate would have already known about it independently of the Sanhedrin. “Hast thou, during all the years thou hast been a Governor, ever heard of Me as a leader of insurrection, or a rebel against the Romans? If thou has never heard anything of this kind against Me, and hast no personal knowledge of my being a rebel, oughtest thou not to pay very little attention to the complaint of my enemies?”337

334 Ibid., 819.
Pilate, who is not used to being questioned by prisoners, who is arrogant and who holds the Jews in contempt answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?” (Jn. 18:35). Pilate admits that he knows nothing about seditious acts or words on the part of Jesus. The governor by his answer is saying, “Look I am not a Jew. I should not be expected to understand the religious and sectarian controversies of Your nation.” Pilate’s question, “What have You done?” has the sense of “What actions have you taken that have provoked this fierce hatred and hostility toward You?” The governor does not believe that our Lord is really a king or political revolutionary. However, he wants to know what lies behind the accusations. Pilate wants to drag this out into the open in order to see whether this prisoner has really done anything against Rome or not. There is a sense of annoyance and perhaps frustration in Pilate’s reply. The whole situation bothers him. He smells a rat and is no mood to play games with the chief priests.

Second, when Pilate asks “What have You done?” our Lord ignores this question and instead defines the nature of His kingdom. “Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here’” (Jn. 18:36). Here Christ gets right to the heart of the matter. He openly admits that He is a king. He says “My kingdom.” But, although He admits that He is indeed a King, He goes on to explain that it is a type of kingdom that does not threaten Caesar or Pilate with an insurrection or violent overthrow.

Our Lord defends Himself by telling Pilate what His kingdom is not. “My kingdom is not of this world…. My kingdom is not from here.” “The literal rendering of the Greek would be ‘out of this world.’ But it evidently means ‘belonging to, dependent on, springing from, connected with.’” In other words, My kingdom’s origin or source is found in heaven not on earth. My authority, rule or kingship does not derive from anything on earth such as popular uprisings, money, weapons, political movements, guerilla warfare, state sponsored warfare, terrorism, popularity, etc, but from God Himself. “His kingdom is not by succession, election, or conquest, but by the immediate and special designation of the divine will and counsel.” Christ is a king and does have a kingdom, but it is a spiritual kingdom that originates from heaven, a kingdom of grace.

Jesus’ statement to Pilate was not a new doctrine. During His ministry when the Pharisees asked Him “when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, ‘the kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, “See here!” or “See there!” For indeed the kingdom of God is within you’” (Lk. 17:21-22). The kingdom does not come with observation like the marching of armies or bold military victories. It rather is a redemptive-spiritual kingdom entered only by being born again. “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is

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339 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1185.
340 Some commentators favor translating entos hymon as “in your midst,” indicating that the kingdom is present among the Pharisees with Jesus and the disciples. This view is supported by a number of arguments. (1) It is said that ancient papyri permit such a translation. (2) Nowhere in the New Testament is the kingdom regarded as something internal. (3) It could not be said to the Christ-hating Pharisees that the kingdom was “within” them. (4) Jesus often speaks of men entering the kingdom, but never of the kingdom entering men. In opposition to this translation those who favor “within you” offer the following arguments. (1) The context strongly favors “within you” for Jesus had just said the kingdom was not an outward visible entity. (2) The “you” is indefinite, thus it does not apply to the unbelieving Pharisees. (3) The New Testament (Mt. 23:36, “the inside of the cup,” the LXX (e.g., Isa. 16:11) and inter-testamental literature (e.g., 1 Mac. 4:48) all support the translation “within you.” (4) Saying “the kingdom is within you” is not at all inconsistent with New Testament teaching that Christ’s kingdom is spiritual. (5) One could add that the translation “within you” was universally accepted by the Latin church fathers.
born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5). Jesus told His disciples that His kingdom was not spread by military might, but rather through service to Christ and one’s neighbor. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Mt. 5:5). Further, as already noted, our Lord emphatically rejected the Jewish crowd’s attempt to make Him an earthly political king; and always refused the attempts of the Jews to get Him involved in a conflict with the Roman authorities (e.g., Mt. 22:21; Mk. 12:17; Lk. 20:25; Jn. 8:3ff.).

Our Lord’s concept of the kingdom as spiritual is assumed by and taught throughout the New Testament. For example, Paul said that “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). When the apostle exhorts strong believers to exercise restraint for the benefit of weaker brethren, he appeals to the nature of the kingdom. “So far from Christ coming to regulate men’s diet, he came to establish righteousness in every sense of that term, and peace in all the fullness of its blessings, and joy in the Holy Ghost. The kingdom of Christ is spiritual, not carnal.” Hodge writes, “The righteousness, peace and joy intended are those of which the Holy Spirit is the author. Righteousness is that which enables us to stand before God, because it satisfies the demands of the law. It is the righteousness of faith, both objective and subjective; peace is the concord between God and the soul, between reason and conscience, between the heart and our fellow men. And the joy is the joy of salvation; that joy which only those who are in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost ever can experience.”

Jesus knew that his answer was totally foreign to Pilate so He explains what He means. He says that if His kingdom were of this world, then He would have an army like other earthly kings and this army would defend His life with brute physical force. Since the Savior’s kingdom “did not spring from the same source as the kingdoms of the world, neither is it supported, maintained, or increased by the same power as that which the kingdoms of the world depend upon. Christ’s kingdom does not depend upon the force of arms: he would have his followers lay these weapons all aside. Christ’s kingdom does not depend, as earthly kingdoms too often do, upon craft, policy, and duplicity.” He tells him that He did not come to set up a kingdom which would interfere with the Roman government. He did not aim at establishing a temporal power, to be supported by armies and maintained by taxes. The only dominion He exercised was over men’s hearts, and the only weapons that His subjects employed were spiritual weapons.”

“Pilate must therefore recognize that his rule is wholly different from that of the political powers of this world, and wholly different from anything that Pilate experienced; hence he constitutes no threat to Roman authority.”

Before we examine the positive aspect of our Lord’s confession (Jn. 18:37), we need to clear up a common misconception regarding the Savior’s statement that His is a kingdom not of this world. This statement is often taken to mean that civil magistrates should have nothing to do with religion; that Jesus only rules in our hearts and only concerns Himself with what occurs in His church; that the state is to be purely secular in the New Covenant era and must not promote one religion over another. In other words, people think Christ is teaching that His kingdom is irrelevant to the world, is not active in this world, has nothing to do with this world and will never change this world. This kind of teaching is very common among premillennialists, both

341 William S. Plummer, Commentary on Romans (Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1870] 1971), 614.
345 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 331.
ancient and modern, especially dispensational premillennialists. Although our Lord is reassuring Pilate that He is not a physical threat to the Roman Empire, He is not saying that His kingdom will not powerfully affect this world. There are a number of reasons why we must reject the retreatist interpretation of this passage.

a) “First, observe that He did not say ‘My kingdom is not in this world,’ but ‘My kingdom is not of this world.’ Believers are not ‘of this world’ (17:6), yet they are in it.” He is speaking of the source of His authority, not the place of His legitimate reign. His kingdom is not of this world but it is in this world and over it.” The fact that Christ’s kingship and authority is from heaven and not earth means that he has an even greater authority over this planet than do political rulers. Although earthly rulers have a genuine authority, their authority is not absolute for they receive their authority from God. Paul even says they are ministers of God (Rom. 13:4). But Jesus, who received a comprehensive, universal authority over everything in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18), sits on God’s throne itself. He is the “King over kings and Lord over lords” (Rev. 19:16). He judges the rulers of the earth (Ps. 2:12) and all political rulers have a moral obligation to serve Him with fear and trembling (Ps. 2:11). It is simply bad exegesis and logic to argue that since Jesus does not resort to earthly methods (guns, bullets, bombs, political revolution, warfare, etc) because His kingdom is spiritual, that His authority is restricted to the prayer closet or church building. Hengstenberg writes, “The word of Jesus, ‘My kingdom is not of this world,’ has often been perverted in the interests of a theory which would sunder the state from the dominion of Christ. Rightly understood, the passage subserves the very opposite purpose. The kingdom that sprang directly from heaven must have absolute authority over all the earth, and it will not submit to be put into obscurity or into a corner. The necessary consequence of the saying, ‘not of this world, not from here,’ is what we find written in Rev. xi. 15: ‘The kingdoms of the world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Anointed; and He shall reign for ever.’”

b) Our Lord’s parables teach that the kingdom would be very small at first in its effect on earth, but over time it would progressively come to dominate this world prior to the second coming. Jesus compared the kingdom to a miniscule mustard seed which grows into a tree (Mt. 13:31-32). There will be an immense development of the kingdom until it embraces all peoples, tribes and tongues. In the parable of the leaven, the gospel kingdom spreads until the whole world is leavened (Mt. 13:33). “This implies that the Christian must live in the world, for the leaven cannot work without contact. Human life must be touched at all points, in order that its work and its play, its religion and its relaxation, its politics and its commerce, its science and its arts, may be raised and warmed by the penetrating action” of Christ’s glorious gospel and its sanctifying effect upon man, institutions and cultures.

Many premillennialists have the idea that if Jesus is not physically present, ruling from Jerusalem with military and police powers, then the kingdom is not actualized on earth. But, this view fails to recognize that the spiritual nature of our Lord’s kingdom is what makes it so strong and permanent. Men are changed not by force or by the barrel of a gun, but by the Holy Spirit from the inside out. A kingdom where people obey out of true love and devotion can never fail. Spurgeon’s comments on this topic are excellent:

Spiritual or not, the kingdom of Christ on earth is real and powerful. It is real none the less, but all the more, because it may fitly be called spiritual. Jesus is even now a king. He said, “I am a king.” Some say that his kingdom is not yet, but is reserved for the latter days; but I aver that he is a king to-day, and that even now Jehovah hath set him as king upon the holy hill of Zion. I bless God that he hath translated us “Into the kingdom of his dear Son.” “Thou art the king of glory, O Christ.” When I say, “Thy kingdom come,” I do not mean that it may begin to be set up on earth, but that it may continue to be set up on in new places, may be extended and grow, for Jesus has at this very moment a kingdom upon the face of the earth, and they that know the truth belong to it, and recognize him as the royal witness by whom the kingdom of truth has been founded and maintained. You remember the remarkable saying which is attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte in his later days at St. Helena: “I have founded a kingdom by force, and it has passed away; but Jesus founded his empire upon love, and therefore it will last for ever.” Verily, Napoleon spoke the truth—Jesus, the right royal Jesus, is Master of innumerable hearts to-day. The world knoweth him not, but yet he has a kingdom in it which shall ere long break in pieces all other kingdoms. True and loyal hearts are to be found among the sons of men, and in them his name still wakes enthusiasm, so that for him they are prepared to live and die. Our Lord is every inch a king, he has his throne of grace, has his scepter of truth, his officers who, like himself, witness to the truth, and his armies of warriors who wrestle not with flesh and blood, and use no carnal weapons, but yet go forth conquering and to conquer. Our Lord has his palace wherein he dwells, his chariot in which he rides, his revenues, though they be not treasures of gold and silver, and his proclamations, which are law in his church. His reigning power affects the destiny of the world at this present moment far more than the counsels of the five great powers: by the preaching of his truth his servants shape the ages, and set up and cast down the thrones of earth. There is no prince so powerful as Jesus, and no empire so mighty as the kingdom of heaven.

The vast majority of interpreters identify the four kingdoms of Daniel as (1) the head of gold—the neo-Babylonian empire; (2) the breast and arms of silver—the Medo-Persian empire; (3) the belly and thighs of bronze—the Grecian empire; and (4) the legs and feet of iron and clay—the Roman Empire. Daniel says that the statue which represents these successive pagan empires is still standing when the kingdom of Christ is set up. In Daniel 2:31-45 the Messiah’s kingdom is described as coming and smiting the fourth world kingdom, crushing it in pieces. Then this stone became a great mountain and filled the whole earth (Dan. 2:35). This amazing prophecy means that the kingdom of heaven or our Lord’s spiritual kingdom, which was established during the Roman Empire (the fourth kingdom), will progressively have victory over the kingdoms of this world. Therefore, even though Jesus’ kingdom is not dependent on carnal

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weapons and does not foment rebellion against the state, it still has the power to sanctify and radically change existing institutions and even nations. It does not accomplish this task with swords of steel, but the two-edged sword of the Spirit.

Premillennial dispensationalists who believe that the kingdom is wholly future have come up with a clever method of reinterpreting this passage to fit into their eschatological paradigm. They argue that the toes of this image represent a revived Roman Empire in the future. They apply the phrase “in the day of these kings” to a future ten nation European (or for some, Middle Eastern) confederacy and not to the statue organically considered which the context demands. The dispensational view must be rejected as being exegetically untenable for “[i]t makes too much of the symbolism. We are not expressly told that there are ten toes. The ten kings can be derived only from the ten horns of Dan. 7:24-27. That there are ten toes is merely inferred from the fact that the colossus appears in the form of a man. Furthermore, the image was not smitten upon the toes but upon the feet (2:34). Now the feet and legs are to be taken together (2:33). Lastly, the phrase in the days of these kings cannot refer to the ten toes (Gaebelein), for the toes are nowhere identified as kings. Nor does it refer to the kings of the fourth monarchy, for no such kings are mentioned; the only kings or kingdoms mentioned are the four empires.”

d) The fact that the kingdom of God originates in heaven and is not spread by the use of the sword does not mean that government officials cannot rule using Christian principles or God’s law. To argue that kings, presidents and judges cannot use the Bible as a basis of law and justice would not only condemn all nations to the fate of positivistic law, relativistic ethics, atheism, statism and injustice; but, would also explicitly contradict many passages of Scripture. “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov. 14:34). What is sin? “Sin is the transgression of the law” (1 Jn. 3:4; cf. Rom. 4:15). “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD” (Ps. 33:12). “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God” (Ps. 9:17). While the Savior’s kingdom and the visible church can function quite well in a heathen nation that has no regard for Christ, the Bible plainly teaches that when civil magistrates have no regard for God’s Son they are in deep trouble. “Every Government is responsible to God, and no Government can expect to prosper without God’s blessing. Every Government is bound to do all that lies in its power to obtain God’s favour and blessing. The Government that does not strive to promote true religion, has no right to expect God’s blessing.”

The Bible even predicts a time when the nations of this earth will trust in the Son of God, obey His law and worship Him. “All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the LORD’s, and He rules over the nations” (Ps. 22:27-28). “Oh, let the nations be glad and sing for joy! For You [the Lord Jesus Christ] shall judge the people righteously, and govern the nations on earth” (Ps. 67:4). “Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations will serve Him.... All nations shall call Him blessed” (Ps. 72:11, 17). “All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O LORD, and shall glorify Your name” (Ps. 86:9). “Praise the LORD, 351

351 “The image represents four successive pagan empires. They are viewed organically because each incorporated the preceding empire. The statue is one. The kings obviously represent the four kingdoms represented by the statue. This should be obvious when we keep in mind that the recipient of the vision (Nebuchadnezzar) is the first king. “The kingdom of Messiah…was set up 1900 years ago in the days of the Caesars by Jesus and His apostles, and has been growing and spreading ever since.” (Oswald T. Allis, Prophecy and the Church [Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974], 123).
352 Edward J. Young, Daniel (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1949), 78.
all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples! For His merciful kindness is great toward us, and the truth of the LORD endures forever” (Ps. 117:1-2).

While believers can never use the sword or coercion to make converts either as private citizens or even as civil magistrates; nevertheless they can promote the true religion by spreading the knowledge of Christ and supporting Bible-believing Reformed churches with their tithes. Isaiah prophesied that the nations would learn God’s law and gospel from the visible church. “Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:2-3). He even prophesied that kings and queens or civil magistrates in the New Covenant era would support the church of Christ. “Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers; they shall bow down to you with their faces to the earth, and lick up the dust of your feet” (Isa. 49:23). “Every good Government should endeavor to promote truth, charity, temperance, honesty, diligence, industry, chastity among its subjects. True religion is the only root from which these things can grow. The Government that does not labour to promote true religion cannot be called either wise or good.”

Much of the confusion regarding the relationship between Christ’s kingdom, which is spiritual, and the civil magistrate, who does not hold an ecclesiastical office or perform ecclesiastical functions, is a failure to understand that while both church and state are separate and distinct spheres of authority both are still directly responsible to Jesus Christ. The church’s sphere of authority is spiritual. It is responsible to preach the gospel, preserve true doctrine and discipline unrepentant church members. This can include admonition, rebuke, exclusion from the Lord’s table and even excommunication if necessary. The church, however, does not have authority to arrest criminals, execute murderers or force thieves to make restitution through physical coercion. The civil sphere, or the state, is under the authority of the resurrected Redeemer and must exercise its authority as a “minister of God” (Rom. 13:4) to punish crimes (biblically defined) by the “sword” or the use of physical coercion. It is not to interfere with the ecclesiastical sphere unless ministers or elders are guilty of committing a civil crime such as fraud, adultery or murder. The church is not to interfere with the civil sphere by using physical force or carnal weapons. However, it can and should use spiritual discipline and even excommunication if necessary for civil magistrates that are guilty of scandalous sin or of promoting serious sins through public policy (e.g., promoting abortion, sodomite rights, legalization of gambling and prostitution, etc). The church fights against evil with spiritual weapons. It preaches the truth to civil authorities and can even publicly rebuke civil magistrates who are guilty of public offenses.

There is nothing in Scripture which teaches that the state cannot serve Christ. However, it serves the Savior in a different way than the church. It does so by implementing civil laws that are based on biblical principles; by having policies that support the true Christian religion and suppress false religions and dangerous heresies; and, by publicly recognizing Jesus Christ as Lord through covenanted and establishing biblical Christianity as the official recognized religion of the nation. While on the one hand, a Christian state must not use the sword or coercion as a method to gain converts; yet on the other hand, it must not pretend to be indifferent or neutral regarding Jesus Christ. Those who argue that all established churches are unlawful,

354 Ibid.
that magistrates must be pluralistic and neutral regarding religion are setting forth the completely absurd notion that a state can only be faithful to Scripture by publicly denying the resurrected King. “It is undoubtedly true that Christ’s kingdom is a kingdom independent of the rulers of this world, and one which they can neither begin, increase, nor overthrow. But it is utterly false that the rulers of this world have nothing to do with Christ’s kingdom, may safely leave religion entirely alone, and may govern their subjects as if they were beasts and had no souls at all.” As Hutcheson observes, “This [passage] is not to be understood as if Christ disallowed that they to whom he hath given the sword should defend his kingdom therewith; for if magistrates even as magistrates, should be nursing parents to the church, and ought to kiss the Son, as the Scriptures do record, then certainly they may and should employ their power as magistrates for removing of idolatry and setting up the true worship of God, and for the defending thereof against violence.”

Therefore, while individual believers must never draw the sword in defense of Christianity and church officers are not to advocate the use of guns, bullets and bombs to defend the name of Christ, civil magistrates can use their God-given authority to pass just laws that honor the Savior by punishing wicked criminals and by protecting the church against public teachers of apostasy, damnable heresy and blasphemy. The idea that Jesus forbids all civil governments from having anything to do with Christianity is unscriptural, “baseless, preposterous and utterly devoid of common sense.”

Christ’s Positive Confession

As our Lord defends Himself against the false charges of the Jews, He not only tells Pilate what His kingdom is not, but also describes what His kingdom is. John 18:37-38 reads, “Pilate therefore said unto him, ‘Art thou a king then?’ Jesus answered, ‘Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.’ Pilate saith unto him, ‘What is truth?’”

When Jesus told Pilate “My kingdom is not of this world” and went on to explain that His servants would not fight on His behalf, Pilate was somewhat confused. He had never heard of a kingdom like this. Therefore, he needs some clarification and returns to his original question. But instead of saying, “Are You the king of the Jews?” he simply says, “Are You a king then?” The question shows that the governor has largely understood what the Savior has said and is satisfied that the Jewish charge of a political or military kingship is false, for he doesn’t say king of the Jews but only king. “So you are a king, then, aren’t you?”

After our Lord acknowledges that He is a king by affirming the rightness of Pilate’s perception (“Thou sayest…”), Jesus informs the governor of the purpose of His coming into the world. Christ’s amazing statement contains three elements.

(1) The Savior uses a double expression to refer to His birth and incarnation; that is, His coming from the presence of God into this world. “For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world” (Jn. 18:37). This Hebraistic parallel manner of speech was an implicit acknowledgment to Pilate that He had come down from heaven to fulfill His mission on earth. The statement, “To this end I was born,” refers to the fact that he was born as a man for a

355 Ibid., 3:288-289.
specific God-given task. As the author of Hebrews says, “Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God’” (Heb. 10:7). The other words, “For this cause came I into the world,” “show that the being of Christ in time and upon earth was preceded by another being [i.e. eternal preexistence].”358 “The governor might not have understood all the meaning that Jesus could put into expression. But at least it would impress him with the fact that Jesus was an unusual person, and that He was speaking of an unusual coming to this world. It is difficult to see how the implication is to be avoided that Jesus is claiming pre-existence.”359 “From the ivory palaces of heaven he had descended into this sin-cursed world in order there to take upon himself his mediatorial task, his saving ministry.”360

(2) Our Lord tells Pilate that He came into the world to bear witness to the truth. Jesus is saying that, unlike other kingdoms that rule by brute force and coercion, He rules by means of truth in the broadest biblical sense of the term, especially the truth of the gospel. It is through the preaching of the gospel that men become subjects of the King. It is only through divine revelation that men can understand the sum of saving knowledge and the requirements of the Savior. As the author of Hebrews says, “God who at various times and in various ways spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom He also made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”(1:1-4). Jesus rules not only because he is divine and has died on the cross as the one for all sacrifice for sin, but also because He brings the finality and completeness of the Word of God. The revelation of God in Christ the Son is perfect, sufficient, complete and final. It is the scepter by which the Messiah rules. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). “The true doctrine about man, and God, and salvation, and sin, and holiness, was almost buried, lost, and gone, when Christ came into the world. To revive the dying light, and erect a new standard of godliness in a corrupt world, which neither Egypt, Assyria, Greece nor Rome could prevent rotting and decaying, was one grand end of Christ’s mission. He did not come to gather armies, build cities, amass treasure, and found a dynasty, as Pilate perhaps fancied. He came to be God’s witness, and to lift up God’s truth in the midst of a dark world.”361

The great power of the Word of God to rule over men’s hearts and consciences is seen in the book of Revelation which speaks of the warrior Prince who asserts His authority, judgment and rule by means of the truth. “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called the Word of God, and the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with the rod of iron” (19:11-15). “Christ rides forth to victory in His character as ‘the faithful and true Witness’ (3:14) as ‘the Word of God’ (19:13). St. John is not describing the Second Coming at the end of the world. He is describing the progress

358 E. W. Hengstenberg, Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, 2:381.
of the Gospel throughout the world, the universal proclamation of the message of salvation, which follows the First Advent of Christ.”

Jesus says that the power and authority of His kingdom is found in the truth. He conquers the world by the sword that proceeds out of His mouth: the infallible Scriptures. How then do we serve as soldiers in the Master’s army? We must believe the truth, live the truth and teach the truth. If we do not believe the truth—that Jesus died for our sins according to Scripture and rose victorious over sin, Satan and death, then obviously we cannot serve the resurrected King. If we do not repent of our sins and live the truth, then we have no reason to believe that our faith is genuine and our relatives, friends and acquaintances have no reason to believe what we say about the gospel.

Our Lord’s teaching should be a warning to every professing Christian not to get sidetracked with movements, causes, political maneuvering, protesting and such that are not thoroughly rooted in the true gospel. Believers who think that they can change society by picketing an abortion clinic or supporting a conservative pagan running for office are deceiving themselves. These things may temporarily help society as a holding action against the degradation of culture. But, without people being changed by the Holy Spirit’s application of the truth to the heart, the change is only outward and temporary.

Jesus’ doctrine regarding the truth ought to be the main concern of everyone. Ask yourself some crucial questions: Have I demonstrated that I belong to the Master’s kingdom by my dedication to the truth? Do I regularly study God’s Word to become acquainted with the truth? Or, am I spending my time in pursuit of pleasures and vanities? Do I think that theology is important? Do I study the best Reformed works on doctrine in order to master the truth? Do I studiously meditate on God’s law so that I can avoid living a lie? “Do I desire to get rid of everything in myself that is not true? Am I anxious to put down around me everything that is false and wicked?... Do I desire to spread the principles of love and kindness, for they are truth? Am I willing to learn, and so become the disciple of the greatest of all teachers, and then, am I willing to bear witness to what I have learned, and so spread the sway of truth? If so, then I am of his kingdom.”

The reason that Christian churches have so little influence in our culture and society today is the simple fact that they have abandoned the truth in many areas (doctrine, worship, church government, ethics, science, etc) in favor of pragmatism and human wisdom. Tragically, the relativism of modern culture (which says there is no absolute truth, there are no ethical absolutes) has influenced many professing Christians to the point where the knowledge of the truth is rejected in favor of having an experience and where even biblical dogmatism is condemned because precision in the truth divides professing Christians. If we are to be effective in advancing the cause of Christ, then we must stoutly maintain the truth in all circumstances. Truth and biblical dogmatism are necessary for all soldiers in the Savior’s kingdom.

As we see how evil the world is around us and see the persecution of Christians in many countries, we must not forget that the power of God’s truth is truly remarkable. When our Lord was crucified and all the disciples were scattered, would anyone in their right mind believe that, within three hundred years, Rome would become a professing Christian state? Would anyone think that the heathen savages of northern Europe (who practiced witchcraft, sorcery and human sacrifice) would be converted and become architects of a Christian civilization? Those poor

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preachers who carried the gospel throughout the world were the instruments in God’s hand that changed wicked barbarians into saints. When the truth of the gospel was overshadowed by a corrupt and apostate church God, raised up the Reformers to point men back to Jesus Christ, to 

*sola Scriptura* and to the truth of the gospel. The Reformation churches responded to the darkness of Romanism with the truth. They formulated creeds, confessions and theological treatises to indoctrinate people in the truth and combat error. They gladly debated priests and papal theologians at the risk of their own lives because of a love of the truth. The answer to error, lies and heresy was to strengthen one’s knowledge of true doctrine, to sharpen it, publish it and proclaim it.

The more modern churches adopt the pragmatism, existentialism and relativism of secular humanism, the more churchmen see themselves as the source of wisdom. Although many churches formally adhere to biblical inerrancy and 

*sola Scriptura*, they deny it by their actions. The 

*sumnum bonum* of many modern evangelical churches is church growth rather than upholding the truth regarding doctrine, worship and ethics. When foolish pastors and church boards see themselves as the source of truth instead of Scripture alone, they have doomed our culture to a new dark age.

(3) Our Lord makes an indirect appeal to Pilate’s conscience. He says, “Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (Jn. 18:38). Those who are of the truth are those who possess the truth and obey it. As John said in his first epistle, “My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth, and by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him” (3:18-19). The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd (Jn. 10:18) and follow Him (Jn. 10:27). If a person believes in Christ, he is of the truth. Christ told the Jewish leaders, “He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God (Jn. 8:47). John writes, “We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us” (1 Jn. 4:6). Those who are of the truth will hear what the Savior says; receive it as true; and, obey it because it is true. Jesus is telling Pilate that His disciples love the truth, have a desire to know the truth and do everything they can to live the truth.

The Master’s statement to Pilate is remarkable. Most people in this world are after wealth, fame, power, leisure, and the like. But our Lord’s disciples are after truth. That is their obsession. This inward heart craving for the truth is not something men are naturally born with, but rather is a result of the Holy Spirit opening blind eyes, unstopping deaf ears and changing hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. “All that by the grace of God are rescued from under the power of the father of lies, and are disposed to receive the truth and submit to the power and influence of it, will hear Christ’s voice, will become his subjects, and will bear faith and true allegiance to him…. All that are in love with truth will hear the voice of Christ, for greater, better, surer, sweeter truths can nowhere be found than are found in Christ.”

Are you of the truth? Do you love the truth or do you hate it because it exposes who you really are? Do you look to Christ as God, as the source of all truth? Or do you delight in the lies of this world because you are unwilling to repent of your sins and embrace the Savior? Before you stands truth or falsehood, light and darkness, Christ and this evil world; if you are of the truth then you will embrace Jesus by faith; if not, your lies will follow you into the pit of hell.

Our Lord is, by implication, saying to Pilate, “Are you of the truth; are you willing to listen?” Tenney notes that “Jesus was more interested in appealing to Pilate than defending Himself. This method appears in all of his other interviews in this Gospel. In each of them Jesus’

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364 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1186.
focus was on reaching the heart of the person he addressed, not simply in magnifying himself. He made an appeal to Pilate, not for acquittal or mercy, but for recognition of truth.\footnote{Merrill C. Tenney, The Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 176.}

If Pilate had been a seeker after the truth, then this would have been the perfect opportunity to find the truth and grasp it by faith. But Pilate did not have ears to hear the truth. Pilate was a man of the world. He was steeped in Greek and Roman skepticism; he knew all about the irrationality and mysticism involved with the gods of Greece and Rome. Therefore, he made the fatal mistake of treating Jesus like just another philosopher, sage or mystic. While he did not believe that Christ was a political revolutionary or any threat to Rome, he also did not accept the Savior’s amazing claims regarding preexistence and truth. He had the Truth standing right there in front of him who spoke words from heaven, yet he asked “What is truth?”

In this answer we see a man who in many ways sounds very modern. In our day of pluralism and relativism where all viewpoints are said to be true and every religion must be given respect in the civil and public square, what one believes becomes unimportant and irrelevant. Religions and philosophies are like foods or clothing styles that can be sampled and discarded when one pleases. The problem with the modern world spirit of pluralism and relativism is that if all religions and worldviews are equally true, then they also are equally false. The modern position really makes autonomous man god, for man is said to determine truth by personal preference. Like Pilate, many men dismiss Christ and the gospel as impractical and a waste of time. Like Pilate, they are unwilling to look to the Savior so they sneer and walk away.

A certain amount of skepticism is understandable given the thousands of false and bizarre cults, religions and philosophies in this world. Most religions are easily disproved as fraudulent and contradictory. This fact, however, does not mean that Jesus Christ can be dismissed. Our Lord not only proved His kingship and deity by perfectly fulfilling prophecy; working hundreds of public miracles; making His own amazing predictions that were perfectly fulfilled (e.g., His betrayal, crucifixion and resurrection, the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, etc); and rising from the dead; but also set forth truth that cannot be refuted. In fact, the Christian worldview is the only religion that can account for reality. Do not be like Pilate who asked an important question in a skeptical, cold manner and then walked away without even waiting for an answer. If you turn your back on Christ, then only nihilism and despair await you. They certainly were for Pilate. As Hengstenberg writes, “These three words ‘What is truth?’ were for Pilate full of destiny. By them he put away truth from himself which so graciously and invitingly appealed to him. By them he laid the foundation for the suicide by which, according to the report of Eusebius, who appeals to Greek historians, he ended his days under the Emperor Caius.”\footnote{E. W. Hengstenberg, Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, 2:383. Klaas Schilder believes that Pilate’s question is an insult to Christ. “We hear him asking: ‘What is truth?’ Such a statement is an instance of negation. In making it, Pilate is placing Christ outside of the sphere of those who are to be taken seriously. Obviously if truth cannot be known anyhow, if the true knowledge of God is unattainable, then its chief ‘Prophet’ is both the most amusing and the most piteous idler attending the world’s vanity fair. That is negation. But from negation Pilate and those with him pass on to defiance. The end of the matter is that the question, What is truth? Inspires the other inquiry, What is justice? It is after Pilate has asked that second question that he gives Jesus up to death. Everyone knows what happened after that: Insult, a defiance of Christ upon the mountain of all kings. What follows is a mock-drama performed in disdain of a presumptuous king: a purple robe, a crown of thorns, a sponge of vinegar supported by a reed and manipulated by sneering soldiers” (Christ on Trial, 340).}
The Verdict

After conversing with our Lord, Pilate went out of the palace taking the Savior with him and returned to the paved courtyard where the Jewish leaders were waiting. Here the governor finds Jesus innocent of all the charges. “I find no fault in Him at all” (Jn. 18:38). Pilate knew that Christ had committed no crime, that He had done nothing wrong and was willing to say so publicly. “It was only fitting that he who was one of the chief agents in killing Him, should publicly declare that like a lamb without blemish, there was ‘no fault in Him.’” Everyone who has ever closely examined the Savior has had to admit that He was not guilty of any sin. In all of human history, Jesus’ perfect character stands alone.

The sinless perfection of Christ is important for two reasons. First, He had to be the sinless lamb of God in order to die for our sins. Jesus, the sinless One, died in our place, to remove the guilt and penalty of our sins. Second, His perfect character means that we can place all of our trust in Him. He is trustworthy and will never let us down. While in life we see the sins and defects in our friends and are often disappointed, we can rest assured that Christ will never disappoint us. Spurgeon notes this important truth:

- "Do you not think that out of the millions of Christians who have lived hoping in Christ some one would have told us if it is his habit to disappoint his people? Out of so many believers who dwell with Him surely some one or other of them, when they came to die, would have told us if He is not all that He professes to be. Would not some one or other have confessed, ‘I trusted in Christ and he has not delivered me; it is all a delusion’? Surely, out of the many we have seen depart we should have found some one or two that would have let out the secret, and have said, ‘He is a deceiver, he cannot save, he cannot help, he cannot deliver.’ But never one dying believer throughout the ages has spoken ill of him, but all have said, ‘We find no fault in him.’" 

Having declared Jesus innocent of all charges, Pilate should have released Christ at this time. But Pilate, being a typical politician, placed truth and justice behind his desire to please Caesar and to avoid problems with the Jews. In Luke’s account (23:4) we find that the chief priests were accompanied by a large crowd of supporters who likely were gathered by the enemies of our Lord to put pressure on Pilate to convict the Savior. With Pilate’s declaration of innocence the Jews became even more determined against the Messiah. Here the synoptic gospels give us some details that John omits:

- And when he was accused of the chief priests and elders, he answered nothing. Then said Pilate unto him, Hearest thou not how many things they witness against thee? And he answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly. (Mt. 27:12-14)

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367 The Greek aition, the neuter of the adjective aitios, meaning ‘responsible, guilty’—here used as a substantive. We find the same word in verse 22, where it is translated ‘cause’ (with the additional phrase, ‘of death’). Arndt and Gingrich helpfully translate the whole expression in verse 22: ‘reason for capital punishment’ (p. 26). Pilate, as governor conducting a Roman trial, was not saying that he found no ‘fault’ in Jesus’ character. He was affirming that he found no crime worthy of punishment” (Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament, 78).

368 J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:293.

And the chief priests accused him of many things: but he answered nothing. And Pilate asked him again, saying, Answerest thou nothing? behold how many things they witness against thee. But Jesus yet answered nothing; so that Pilate marvelled. (Mk. 15:3-5)

And they were the more fierce, saying, He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Galilee to this place. (Lk. 23:5)

The Jews were not expecting such a serious setback in their goal to have Jesus crucified. Thus, they responded by becoming “more fierce.” The Greek word, epischyon, translated as “were the more fierce” (KJV, NKJV), “more urgent” (RSV), or “kept on insisting” (NASB), means literally “to grow stronger.” The Jews became even more determined and insistent in their accusations against the Messiah as if raw determination alone could force Pilate’s hand, even in the face of truth and justice. With this fierce, obstinate attitude, the Jews once again accused Christ of many things (Mk. 15:3; Mt. 27:13). They even reported the same charge of stirring up the people, but now threw in the added detail that the trouble began in Galilee (Lk. 23:5). Galilee at that time was a hotbed of political subversion against Rome.

Pilate’s “announcement was received with a shriek of disappointed rage and the loud reiteration of the charges against Him. It was a thoroughly Jewish spectacle. Many a time had this fanatical mob overcome the wishes and decisions of their foreign masters by the sheer force of clamor and pertinacity [i.e. unyielding, obstinate, perversely persistent].” The Jews hated their Messiah so much they raged against Him like a pack of wild dogs—“They were more clamorous and noisy; they cried out louder and exerted themselves with great fury and violence.”

In the reaction of the Jews to Pilate’s declaration of the innocence of Christ we see a sharp contrast between Jesus and His kingdom and the world and all the enemies of true religion. While the Savior ruled by truth and opposed His enemies with infallible Words from heaven and good works, the enemies of our Lord can only attack Him by lying about His character and seeking His death.

Two of Satan’s favorite weapons against God’s people throughout history have been false witnesses or slander and physical coercion or violence. We see this in how Christ rebuked His enemies: “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (Jn. 8:44). Throughout our Lord’s ministry the Jews sought to kill Him and they did everything they could to destroy His reputation. They sent their wicked underlings to spread the lies that He was “a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Lk. 7:34). Our Lord was accused of being a bastard (Jn. 8:48) and a demon possessed Samaritan (Jn. 8:48) who cast out demons by the power of Satan (Mk. 3:22).

In the apostolic era the Jews accused Paul of being a “plague” (Ac. 24:5) and attempted to have him killed for sedition against Rome (Ac. 17:5-8). In the post-apostolic era pagan Romans often accused Christians of killing and eating babies, drinking blood and having orgies. In the sixteenth century Roman Catholics accused Protestants of being gross, sensuous libertines who had no regard for holiness whatsoever. The tactic of Satan and his minions has not changed throughout all of church history. We must not be surprised if we are slandered by the unbelievers.

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around us. If we are faithful to God’s Word we must expect to be mistreated and maligned by the secular media, by the pagan civil magistrates, and by antinomian and heretical professors of religion. Also, if the world speaks well of us, then we need to carefully examine our lives to see if we are compromised in doctrine or ethics.

We must look to Christ as He endured the many false accusations against Him. We must follow our Lord’s example and be prepared for the attacks when they do come. If our Savior, who was ethically perfect, was attacked with such ferocity, then we who are far from perfect will not be able to escape the lies and slander that come from the devil’s followers. “If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household?” (Mt. 10:25). “Nothing is too bad to be reported against a saint. Perfect innocence is no fence against enormous lying, calumny, and misrepresentation. The most blameless character will not secure us against false tongues. We must bear the trial patiently. It is part of the cross of Christ. We must sit still, lean back on God’s promises, and believe that in the long run truth will prevail.”

The Lord’s Silence

Both Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus answered these accusations with nothing, not even one word. This silence astonished Pilate. “It was as if the surging of the wild waves broke far beneath against the base of the rock, which, untouched, reared its head far aloft to the heavens. But as He stood in the calm silence of Majesty, Pilate greatly wondered.” By His silence our Lord was once again fulfilling prophecy (Isa. 53:7, “He opened not his mouth”) and also was placing Himself in a position where crucifixion was virtually inevitable, for Roman law at that time convicted men who refused to defend themselves. Pilate was greatly amazed by Christ’s silence and even encouraged the Savior to speak: “Answerest thou nothing? Behold how many things they witness against thee” (Mt. 27:4). Pilate, who had no malice against the Savior, urges Jesus to defend Himself because he wanted Christ to clear Himself. Although the governor may have thought our Lord was a misguided religious idealist, he knew that he was harmless as a dove and did not want to put Him to death.

Pilate’s great astonishment at the silence of Jesus is understandable given the following considerations. First, the governor had been through many trials and was used to defendants giving a very animated, vocal self-defense. Jesus may have been the first defendant to remain perfectly silent before His accusers. Second, Pilate had just talked with Christ and knew by our Lord’s own words that He was innocent. Why then would He remain silent before His enemies?

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373 Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 2:571-572.
374 A. N. Sherwin-White writes, “The story of the reluctance, or at least the surprise, of Pilate, however much it may have been worked up for the propaganda purposes of the authors, is not without Julio-Claudian analogies. The Roman criminal courts were more familiar with the absentee accuser than with the defendant who would not defend himself. A series of ordinances beginning with a well-known decree of the Senate inspired by the emperor Claudius sought to protect defendants against defaulting accusers who left their victims, as Claudius complained, pendentes in albo, swinging idle on the court lists. But a better comparison comes from the procedure in the early martyr trials, first testified, but not first employed, seventy years later. Those who did not defend themselves were given three opportunities of changing their minds before sentence was finally given against them. This was an early technique already established as the regular thing before Pliny’s investigations in c. A.D. 110, his letter about the Christians being the earliest evidence for it” (Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, (1963) 1978], 25-26).
Third, this was a death penalty case. Was not this Nazarene afraid of death, the excruciating death of the cross? People in our Lord’s position at this point would be greatly afraid. They would be begging and pleading for their lives. But here stands Jesus without fear or agitation of any kind. “It was not the silence of defeat or confusion but of a triumphant resolution.” Pilate must be thinking, “What kind of man is this who without fear would go willingly to the cross?” Fourth, the chief priests were accusing the Savior of being a dangerous, troublesome, aggressive revolutionary, yet here stands a peaceful, silent, dignified, calm Man, gentle like a lamb before Pilate. Why would such a holy, guiltless, noble Man refuse to refute His wicked, dishonest accusers?

Chapter 9: The Civil Trial of Christ—The Savior before Herod

When the Jews had mentioned Galilee as the starting point for our Lord’s “subversive” work, they thought that they would be stimulating Pilate to act against Christ, for Galilee had been a notorious place of sedition against Rome. This plan appeared to backfire, for Pilate did not want to be the one who sent Jesus to His death and was looking for a way to pass the problem on to someone else. Therefore, he seized upon the mention of Galilee as an opportunity to get rid of this troubling case. Luke writes, “When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked whether the man were a Galilean. And as soon as he knew that he belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who himself also was at Jerusalem at that time” (23:6-7). According to Roman law a criminal might be tried in any one of three different jurisdictions: “at the court of his birthplace, of his domicile, or of the place of the commission of his crime. Jesus had lived and worked in Galilee for so long a time that he might be remanded to the jurisdiction of Herod.” If Herod made a judgment for or against Jesus that angered the people or caused a riot, then Pilate would not be blamed before Caesar. From an unbelieving, pragmatic viewpoint Pilate’s decision was brilliant. From the standpoint of truth and justice it was selfish, cowardly and sinful. So, our Lord is once again moved through the streets of Jerusalem to (according to various scholars) either the old palace of Herod’s father or the old palace once owned by the Maccabean rulers. The distance from Pilate’s Praetorium and Herod’s residence was not great and thus it would not have taken long to move the Savior back and forth between these places. It is very likely that the Jewish leaders followed Jesus to Herod’s residence to press their accusations if necessary.

In the trial (or trials) of our Lord this would be the fourth time that He would be led in bonds through the streets of Jerusalem. First, He was taken to the house of Anna; then, the secret illegal meeting with Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin; then, to Pilate; and now to Herod. Satan arranged a two-fold antichristian witness against the Savior with two wicked ecclesiastical judges, Annas and Caiaphas, and two evil civil judges, Pilate and Herod. The apostolic church understood that there was a satanic coalition between the heathen and the Jews against the Messiah. “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done” (Ac. 4:27-28).

The events that transpired before Herod are only recorded in the gospel of Luke:

375 Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14-18, 819.
And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him. Then he questioned with him in many words; but he answered him nothing. And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused him. And Herod with his men of war set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate. And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves. (Lk. 23:8-12)

As we examine this section of Scripture there are a number of areas to consider. First, who is Herod and why is this appearance only mentioned by Luke (cf. Ac. 4:27-28)? Second, we want to examine Herod’s perverse interest in Jesus. Third, we will consider our Lord’s perfect silence in Herod’s presence. Fourth, we will ponder the Savior’s suffering at the hands of Herod and his wicked men. Fifth, what is the point of union in these wicked men? May the Lord enable us to profit from His infallible Word.

(1) The Herod of which Luke speaks is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who attempted to murder Christ by having all the male children two years old and under slain in Bethlehem (Mt. 2:1-18). After the death of Herod the Great, his kingdom was divided by Augustus and ruled by three of his surviving sons. Archelaus was given the southern area of Herod’s kingdom which included Judea, Samaria and Idumea. Philip was placed over the area of Decapolis, a sparsely populated region that encompassed the eastern section of Herod’s kingdom. Antipas had authority over the northernmost region which included the provinces of Galilee and Perea. In A.D. 6 Archelaus (Herod’s eldest son) was deposed because of his incompetence, severe tyranny and cruelty and was banished to Vienna in Gaul. Therefore, while Antipas and Philip retained their territories, “Archelaus’ domains were reduced to a province under the rule of prefects or procurators.” This point explains why Pilate had authority over the southern section of Herod’s old kingdom during the trial of Christ.

Herod Antipas figures more prominently in the gospels than his brothers because he ruled over Galilee and Perea where John the Baptist and Jesus conducted most of their preaching. He is presented in Scripture as a very wicked man who arrested and then murdered John the Baptist to please his wife Herodias (Mt. 14:3-12; Mk. 6:17-29; Lk. 3:19-20). When he first heard about the ministry of Jesus, he feared that Christ was John the Baptist raised from the dead (Mt. 14:1-2; Mk. 6:14-16; Lk. 9:7-9). In Luke’s account we learn that Herod wanted to kill Jesus (13:31). Although this report came from some Pharisees, Jesus accepted it at face value and called Herod a “fox,” an animal noted for its cunning and deception in capturing prey. Herod likely wanted to kill the Lord because of His popularity among the people. Herod Antipas, like many rulers in his day, was dedicated to hanging on to power and fulfilling carnal pleasures. That he was a weak and indecisive leader can be deduced from the sway his wicked wife held over him. He submitted to his wife’s will when he beheaded John the Baptist, whom he knew to be a righteous and innocent man. The history of Herod and his evil character must be kept in mind when we examine the Savior at the bar before Herod.

Another interesting question is why do none of the other gospels offer any parallel to Luke 23:6-12? One likely reason is that Luke is writing to Theophilus (an educated Christian Gentile who likely is from the ruling class of society) and thus is more concerned with showing the Roman judicial procedure. He may also have wanted Gentiles to know that two separate

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Roman courts could find nothing wrong with Jesus. Another more remote possibility is “that Antipas has been introduced, in part, for the sake of a parallel with the role of Agrippa in the trial of Paul in Acts 25.” In any case, we can be thankful that Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit to include this encounter in his gospel.

(2) Herod had a perverse interest in Christ. Luke writes, “Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad; for he had desired for a long time to see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him” (Lk. 23:8-9). We refer to Herod’s interest in the Savior as perverse because it was not a sincere saving interest. Herod’s desire to behold the Messiah was carnal in nature. We know this both from Herod’s past and the passage before us. For our edification let us note Herod’s ungodly motives for wanting to meet the Master.

First, there is the issue of Herod’s tortured conscience. Herod had arrested John the Baptist to please his wife Herodias because John had preached against their marriage, which according to Scripture was unlawful (Mt. 14:3-4; Mk. 6:17-18). Herod Antipas took Herodias from Philip his brother (Mk. 6:18). Therefore, he was involved in adultery (for Philip was still alive) as well as incest. “The Mosaic law forbids the marriage of a brother’s wife (Lev. 18:16; 20:21) with the [rare] exception of raising children to a deceased childless brother by levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5; Mark 12:19).” Even though Herodias wanted John dead, for a time Herod refused because he feared the multitude who regarded John as a prophet and he knew John was a righteous man. “Herodias…wanted to kill him, but she could not; for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly” (Mk. 6:19-20).

However, Herodias, through her daughter, manipulated Herod into having John beheaded in his prison cell. From this time on Herod was haunted by a guilty conscience. John had paid Herod secret visits and Herod had even toyed with the true religion. But, he never truly repented or looked to Christ. Thus, Herod knew that his act against John was very wicked. The gruesome murder troubled his conscience and he developed a superstitious obsession with John, to the point that at times he believed that Jesus may have been John raised again from the dead. “Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done by Him; and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had risen from the dead….

Given this history we can see why Herod was happy to see Jesus. Herod had a guilty conscience regarding John that increased his curiosity about and fear of the Nazarene. The Savior would now stand before Herod as a bound prisoner dependent on Herod for His freedom. A bound, helpless figure would calm Herod’s fears and satisfy his curiosity, for someone in Herod’s position would expect a bound man under the threat of death to answer questions and perform on cue.

Second, we see in Herod’s history a certain curiosity with religion. He had met privately a number of times with John the Baptist and was, to a certain degree, pricked in his conscience regarding the truth. He even acknowledged John to be a just and holy man. He also had a strong curiosity regarding Jesus, the miracle worker. The problem with Herod, however, was that he viewed the true religion as a spectator sport. It was not something that should control one’s life, but rather something to seek pleasure in, like a sporting event or some form of entertainment. At bottom, Herod was a hedonist. He was a self-centered egomaniac who thought that everything

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existed to satisfy his wants and needs. Whenever the time came that he had to make a decision between truth, justice and following God or serving his own interests, he always followed the latter. His god was self. His ethic was purely autonomous and situational; his real religion was pleasure.

Tragically, many Americans have much in common with Herod Antipas when it comes to Christ and the true religion. They are very curious regarding the Savior and are interested in some doctrine. However, they do not have a saving interest in the Mediator. They occasionally attend church out of curiosity, but they have no heartfelt commitment to a local Bible-believing congregation. They like the idea of going to heaven. But when a decision has to be made between following Christ and their own selfish interests, they act just like Herod. They like to talk the talk, but are unwilling to walk the walk. They have what the Puritans called a mere historical faith; they regard the truths of Scripture regarding our Lord as they would a good history book. “Yes, it is very interesting. But it is not something worth making any personal sacrifices over.” This attitude explains why dispensational premillennial prophecy books and novels, which have little to do with the truth and more to do with an author’s fantasies, are so popular.

We must learn from Herod’s profane and worldly example. Curiosity and religious impressions are not enough. The Son of God must never be treated as a side show at the county fair. It is self-deception to think that Christ can be relegated to a side compartment so we can live self-centered, hedonistic lives. This attitude is common today because many professing Christians do not have true saving faith and do not really love Jesus. They are not looking for the Rose of Sharon or the pearl of great price, but rather for a fire escape from hell. This point is exhibited in the answer many “evangelicals” give to the question, “What is your central hope in life?” Do they say: “My hope is in the person and work of Christ; his precious blood which washes away my guilt and sin; and the imputation of His perfect righteousness to my account”? No! They say: “My hope is in the rapture. I can’t wait to escape the great tribulation.”

It is important that we examine our hearts to see if the spirit of Herod has affected us. Do we treat Christ and religion as a curiosity or do we have a hearty trust in the Savior at all times? Do we play with doctrine as a purely intellectual exercise or do we search the Scriptures daily to be closer to the Lord and to be holier to please Him? There is perhaps nothing more dangerous to the soul than to play with Christianity as an intellectual toy, even to have been influenced by its teachings to a degree; but then set it all aside to serve one’s own lusts. As Peter says, “If, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: ‘A dog returns to his own vomit,’ and, ‘a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire’” (2 Pet. 2:20-22).

The practice of treating Christ, His church and His teachings as a vain curiosity is not new. Charles H. Spurgeon was well familiar with religious Herodians in his own day. In preaching about such people he says, “It is not likely that their knowledge of religious things will be of any use to them, but they are even eager after it; the church of God is their theatre, divine service is their theatre, ministers are to them as actors, and the gospel itself so much play-house property. They are a sort of religious Athenians, spending their time in nothing else than in hearing some new thing: hoping that perhaps some singular and unexpected discourse may be delivered in their hearing which they can retell in the next company where they would raise a
laugh. To them preaching is all a farce, and, worked up with a few falsehoods of their own, it makes excellent fun for them, and causes them to be regarded as amusing fellows. Let them look at Herod, and see in him their leader, the type of what they really are or may soon become.”

Third, Herod had an interest in Christ, not for who He truly was or because of His mission on earth, but because Jesus was a kind of celebrity. The Nazarene was the talk of the town and Herod had “heard many things about Him” (Lk. 23:8). Throughout history there has always been a fascination regarding people who are famous or even infamous. Herod no doubt had heard of the Savior’s following, His amazing teaching and His frequent miracles. There was something unique about Jesus and Herod wanted to be in the presence of a person so famous and noteworthy for His words and deeds. The problem for Herod, however, was that he did not seek to behold the Lord out of a deep sense of need or out of a consciousness of guilt and sin. Herod was an adulterer and murderer, yet he did not think that he needed atonement for his sin.

The great joy of Herod to see Jesus the celebrity should be a warning to professing Christians in our own culture, which is obsessed with the cult of personality. The obsession in our society for the rich and famous has had an impact on many churches; in particular, the congregations which subscribe to the church growth movement. The trend in the last twenty years has been toward mega-churches where the pastor is a celebrity-entertainer and where everything is big and extravagant. Many churches are no longer places of worship and the exposition of Scripture, but are essentially theaters where large flashy productions take place. People do not come to church to get closer to the Savior as He is revealed in Scripture, but rather to be entertained by a celebrity preacher. Many people in these mega-churches are not following Christ; they are jumping on the band wagon of some new sensation. We know this is true because when prominent ministers are caught in situations of scandalous sin or are guilty of heretical teaching, their flocks, for the most part, remain intact. These people are the Herodians of celebrity.

Fourth, Herod was “exceedingly glad” because he hoped that our Lord would perform a miracle. Herod Antipas had very likely heard all about Jesus from John the Baptist. We must remember that John’s purpose in life was to point men to the Lamb of God who redeems men from their sins. Herod probably knew that Christ was the only One who could forgive sin. He also certainly knew that he himself was an adulterer and a murderer. Note, however, that Herod’s interest is not in truth, doctrine or forgiveness, but in witnessing a miracle. In keeping with Herod’s desire to be entertained, he ignored the central purpose of Jesus’ mission and wanted to see something extraordinary—something bizarre and fantastic that he could tell his friends. In modern terminology, we would say that Herod wanted to have an exciting experience.

In order to understand why Herod’s desire was so perverse we must define the word miracle and explain the purpose miracles serve in Scripture. A miracle is a sign or wonder from God (cf. Ex. 7:3; Dt. 6:22; 34:11; Neh. 9:10; Ps. 135:9; Jer. 32:31; Dan. 6:27; Jn. 4:48; Ac. 2:43; Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4) that serves to authenticate the inspired teaching or command of God’s authorized representative. The miracle certifies that the prophet, apostle or evangelist has truly been sent by God and that his words or teachings must be accepted as divinely inspired. Miracles are supernatural events that are obviously not natural, everyday occurrences. (Now that the canon of Scripture is closed, the sign gifts which served to authenticate the messenger of divine revelation have ceased.)

381 B. B. Warfield writes, “Miracles do not appear on the pages of Scripture vagrantly, here, there, and elsewhere indifferently, without assignable reason. They belong to revelation periods, and appear only when God is speaking
Some important things to note regarding miracles or signs are that they are not arbitrary. They are not accomplished to satisfy our curiosity or to entertain us and they are not an end in themselves. Generally speaking, they pointed men to the truth of divinely inspired teaching. Specifically, they pointed men to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Herod Antipas was not interested in learning about the cross of Christ. He did not care about the truth of the gospel. Therefore, his desire for a miracle simply for the amazement factor was very sinful. He was treating the work of the Holy Spirit in pointing men to the Redeemer as a circus act.

Today Herod’s philosophy toward miracles has become widely popular within the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement. In most Charismatic churches the biblical purpose of miracles has long been forgotten and thus signs are treated as ends in themselves. They are not performed out in public in front of everyone in order to authenticate a true messenger of God; but rather are an integral aspect of many Charismatic “worship” services and “revival” meetings. (Keep in mind, when we speak of modern Charismatic miracles we are referring to pretended manifestations of the Spirit, not true miracles.) Miracles are performed today not to point men to Christ but as part of the health and wealth gospel. In other words, people are taught that the Savior suffered and died to make people healthy and wealthy. Just like Herod, people go to church to see a miracle, but they are not interested in Christ as He is revealed in Scripture or in the true gospel of sovereign grace.

What is important in these churches is having a wonderful experience, not in learning the truths of Scripture. Tragically, most Charismatics place having an experience (a supposed charismatic manifestation of the Holy Spirit) ahead of biblical truth. As a result, theological precision, detailed creeds and confessions, systematic theology, careful exegetical preaching and the great biblical achievements of the Protestant Reformation have been cast aside. When the Bible is used, it is twisted to fit in with one’s experience. For many, the Bible is ignored because it lacks the excitement and immediacy of a “spiritual experience.” Like Herod they fail to understand that authentic spirituality comes only from a belief in the truth, not from watching an exciting miracle. Like Herod they confuse spirituality with excitement, emotion and external phenomena. God, however, is interested in one’s faith in Christ and the personal godliness that grows out of the Holy Spirit’s application of the Word of God to the heart (Jn. 17:17; 1 Pet. 2:2; etc). Herod had heard the Word of God regarding Jesus directly from the greatest Old Testament prophet and had rejected it. Therefore, Herod’s desire for a miracle had more in common with sorcery and witchcraft than true religion.

The neo-pentecostal paradigm with its Herodian view of experience is one of the most dangerous religious movements against orthodox Protestantism to arise in the last one hundred years. As Abraham Kuyper figuratively expresses it [Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology, E. T. 1898, p. 368; cf. pp. 355 ff.], it has not been God’s way to communicate to each and every man a separate store of divine knowledge of his own, to meet his separate needs; but He rather has spread a common board for all, and invites all to come and partake of the richness of the great feast. He has given to the world one organically complete revelation, adapted to all, sufficient for all, provided for all, and from this one completed revelation He requires each to draw his whole spiritual sustenance. Therefore it is that the miraculous working which is but the sign of God’s revealing power, cannot be expected to continue, and in point of fact does not continue, after the revelation of which it is the accompaniment has been completed.” (Counterfeit Miracles [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, (1918) 1974], 25-27).
years. Because it has set having an experience above Scripture and doctrine, it has been used of Satan to bring together professing evangelicals with modernists and especially Roman Catholics. The unifying factor is no longer correct doctrine or detailed confessions that summarize and organize the truths of Scripture; but rather the subjective pseudo-mystical experiences that people, regardless of belief, have in common. This sad truth is demonstrated by the following story told by John MacArthur, Jr.:

A close associate of mine attended a charismatic businessmen’s meeting in Chicago where a Catholic priest testified that Mary had given him the gift of tongues while he was saying the rosary. Then the charismatic pastor leading the meeting got up and said, “What an amazing testimony! Aren’t you glad God isn’t bound by our ideas of what’s doctrinally acceptable? Some people would try to dismiss this brother’s testimony just because it doesn’t jibe with their doctrinal system. But how you get filled with the Holy Ghost doesn’t matter, as long as you know you’ve got the baptism!” The audience, numbering in the hundreds, broke into wild, sustained applause. No one seemed to question whether that man’s testimony, so obviously in conflict with biblical truth, might be spurious.①

In our day when there are Herodians warming the pews of many churches, we need to search our hearts and ask some probing questions. Are we in love with Christ as He is revealed in the Scripture; or, are we in love with the spectacular? Do we look to Jesus as Savior and Lord; or, are we looking for a magic talisman to bring us health, wealth and more material pleasures? Are we treating the majestic Son of God as a mere ticket to the Holy Ghost circus; or, are we praying for the Holy Spirit to deepen our love, faith, knowledge and commitment to the King of kings? Are we looking to the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible, as our standard for faith and life; or, have we exalted subjective experience and vague impressions above the authority of Scripture? While Charismatics believe they are part of the greatest revival in history, the truth is that they are ushering the church into a new dark age of ignorance, superstition and charlatanism. Remember, John warns us that many who professed faith in Jesus because of the miracles were not true believers. “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man” (Jn. 2:23-25). These people were astonished at our Lord’s miracles and were even intellectually convinced that He was the Messiah. But Jesus knew that these people were not to be depended upon. Yes, they were greatly excited by the miracles, but they were never truly converted. The Savior knew that their hearts were not right in the sight of God even though they had a wonderful experience and their feelings were moved. Beloved, beware of the modern Herodians.

(3) Luke says that Herod questioned Jesus with many words “but He answered him nothing” (Lk. 23:9). This silence raises a question. Why was our Lord willing to speak to Pilate and tell him about the nature and purpose of His kingdom, but not willing to speak even one word to Herod Antipas? There are a number of reasons why the Savior refused to speak.

First, Herod had already heard the truth from John the Baptist on a number of occasions and had refused to repent. Herod had denied the Word of God by his base lifestyle, his continued adultery and his worship of sinful pleasures. Herod had even struck down the great prophet John with the sword. He had silenced the “voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Mk. 1:3; Mt. 3:3).

① John F. MacArthur, Jr., Charismatic Chaos (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 16-17.
Men quell the voice of prophets in order to banish the Word of God from their presence. They murder the voice of God because they cannot tolerate the bright, shining light of the truth upon their darkened lives. Since Herod had trod John the Baptist and the gospel he preached underfoot as worthless rubbish, Jesus had no intention of wasting words on this heartless, truth-murdering profligate.

If Herod had been an ignorant heathen who was sincere in his questions, our Lord probably would have given him some instruction. If Antipas had some conviction in his soul and wanted to believe in Christ, then Jesus would have spoken to him the words of life. But the Savior knew that Herod was a hardened reprobate who had already emphatically and repeatedly rejected the truth. Therefore, our Lord had no intention of satisfying the curiosity of this satanic dog. The Mediator in His absolute silence was simply following His own instructions to His disciples: “Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces” (Mt. 7:6). “Dogs and swine are those who, after the gospel has been preached to them retain their vicious, filthy nature.”383 The pearls represent the gospel and the great truths of the Bible which must be treated with reverence and respect. We are commanded not to set forth the precious mysteries of the faith to men who already despise them and will simply trample God’s beautiful, pure gospel pearls into the mud. Christ teaches that not only will such people not benefit from the truth, but they will abuse our goodwill and mistreat us. It is for this reason that our Lord instructed His disciples: “And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words [i.e. receive the truth of the gospel], when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet” (Mt. 10:14; cf. Mk. 6:11). Spurgeon writes,

Disclaim all fellowship with those who will not have fellowship with your Lord. Be not angry; do not denounce with bitterness; just “shake off the dust of your feet,” and go elsewhere. Don’t depart to rail at the people in private; but let them know that you quit them because they refuse your message. Do this openly, and in the most solemn and instructive manner, hoping that your departing act may be remembered. It is to be feared that we treat rejecters of Christ in a sadly trifling manner, and do not hold up their rejection of our King to the detestation it deserves. We ought to let impenitent sinners know that we consider them out of our fellowship. If they will not hear, we must make them see that we disown them, and count them to be unclean, because they refuse Christ Jesus. How little of this is done by the smooth-tongued preachers of today!384

Jesus saw in Herod a man “so mean, cunning, cowardly, and heartless, that he viewed him as a fox to be let alone rather than a lost sheep to be sought after. He was a tree twice dead, and plucked up by the roots. All the Master did was to maintain an absolute silence in his presence; and, let him question as he might, ‘he answered him nothing.’”385

Second, Jesus knew that Herod wanted a performance and He did not come into this world to entertain men, but to save them. Antipas viewed his court as a theater and the Savior as a circus act. For this reason our Lord gave him what he deserved—pure silence. It would be good for ministers and elders to learn from Christ’s example and stop turning the church into a theater for crass entertainment: skits, music performances, jokes and various frivolities. While the Master said not to cast pearls before swine, modern churchmen think churches should be made

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into swine troughs to give the unregenerate masses what they want. In the matter of sacred truth, let us follow Jesus and not cater to the Herods of this world.

Third, Herod had known about our Lord for over three years and had had plenty of opportunities to hear Him preach; yet, Herod had passed these opportunities by to indulge his own sinful pleasures. Jesus had a very open public ministry. He preached in synagogues, on hillsides, by Lake Galilee, in the temple precincts, on flat plains, in boats and houses. If Herod wanted to know the truth, then why did he not sit at the feet of the Master? Antipas did not hear the Son of God preach because he didn’t want to hear the truth. He simply didn’t care. He was a busy ruler; he had parties and great feasts to attend. Herod had treated the Messiah as of no importance and the Word of God as irrelevant to life and thus he despised the truth. Now that he had Jesus before him in bonds, on terms acceptable to himself, he was ready for a little intellectual stimulation. But having despised hundreds of opportunities to hear the truth from God’s own Son, the door was now closed. Christ had no intention of rewarding his habitual shunning of the truth. The Savior was silent before him. Nothing! Not one word!

What a warning this scene should be to every one of us. How many people are there who have wasted years upon years refusing to attend a Bible-believing church and thus have willingly refused to hear about Jesus Christ and His gospel? “Beware how you waste opportunities. Dear hearers, beware how you waste your Sabbaths. There may come a day when you would count all your wealth to have another invitation to Christ, but it will be denied you; for you must die, and the voice of mercy will never ring in your ears again. They that will not when they may, shall not when they would. Many will knock after the Master of the house has risen up and shut to the door; but when he shutteth, no man openeth. The door was shut on Herod.”

If you do not look to Christ today with the eyes of faith and trust in His perfect sacrifice for sin and glorious resurrection, then the time will come when you will agonize over your Herodian ways. “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries” (Heb. 10:26-27).

Fourth, Herod approached Christ as a proud prince instead of as a poor beggar. Whenever we come to Jesus we must always do so from a position of complete humility, as helpless sinners in need of grace and mercy. Our Lord is no respecter of men; He is not in the least impressed by political power, riches, talents or fame. He will answer the prayers of a poor, diseased, blind beggar who acknowledges his sin and admits that he has absolutely nothing to offer God. But He will not listen to those who are proud, who think that God must answer to their so-called personal righteousness or good works. Therefore, the Savior said, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Mt. 9:13). This passage makes it clear that not to those who consider themselves worthy, but rather to those who understand that they cannot save themselves and are in desperate need of salvation that the gospel invitation is carefully applied. “It was sinners, the lost, the straying, the beggars, the burdened ones, the hungry and thirsty, whom Jesus came to save.”

Our Lord was critiquing the Pharisees’ works-righteousness religion with satire. To everyone who thinks that their own good works, or subjective righteousness, play a role in salvation Jesus says, “I will not save you.” Those who think they are qualified are disqualified. Only those who are poor in spirit shall enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:3). Herod who likely had already heard the gospel from John, who had been confronted by the baptizer regarding his scandalous sins, was not sensible of his guilt or his condition. He

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386 Ibid, 28:104.
was not hungering or thirsting after righteousness (Mt. 5:6). He was not begging God saying, “Turn thou me, and I will be turned” (cf. Lam. 5:21). He did not think he was sick and saw no need for a physician (Mt. 9:12). If we are to receive salvation from Christ then we must come to Him as naked beggars with nothing in our hands. We must look away from ourselves and cling to Him by faith alone. Herod’s arrogant self-sufficiency and refusal to acknowledge his guilty record and wicked heart shut him off from the fountain of life.

(4) We need to examine the abuse and suffering that our Lord endured at the hands of Herod and his soldiers. Herod Antipas had looked at the Savior as a curiosity. He wanted dearly to be entertained by some miracle. As noted, he looked at the Messiah as a person would look at a famous circus performer. He wanted amazing signs and profound teaching. Yet, the Lord gave Herod nothing; He stood there silent. How does Antipas respond to this silence? Interestingly, he does not condemn Jesus. There is no shouting in anger. There is not even any evidence that Christ was beaten or threatened with violence. Instead, Herod and his men proceed to mock Him. Herod had wanted our Lord to perform as in a theater. The Savior’s refusal did not stop Herod from attaining the entertainment that he so desperately desired. Luke writes, “Then Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him back to Pilate” (23:11).

Herod, the entertainment seeker, became the director of his own mock comedy with Christ as the star and his bodyguards as laughing stage hands. Antipas and his soldiers made sport with the Mediator by repeatedly ridiculing and mocking Jesus. They laughed and giggled as they insulted the Son of God. They mocked our Lord’s kingship by placing a gorgeous, radiant garment on Him. It is possible that “Herod put it on Christ as a kind of caricature of the so-called toga candida in which according to the Roman custom those persons were dressed who presented themselves as candidates for this or that official office. If this interpretation is correct, Herod would have been mocking Christ by ludicrously making him a candidate for the kingship. Naturally the motivation for such conduct would have to be found in the charge of the high priest that Christ had wanted to regard himself as king.” However, it is much more likely that Herod simply found it amusing that a man in bonds, with no visible supporters, with a face disfigured, beaten and bloodied, covered with dirt, spit and sweat could claim to be a king. He was probably thinking, “Well if you claim to be a king, then here is a shining, beautiful robe. Here, we will make you a king.” After the robe was placed on Jesus they circled Him, laughing and jeering at His humiliation.

At one time Herod had feared Jesus, thinking perhaps He was John the Baptist who had risen from the dead. But now that Antipas saw the Savior in His state of deep humiliation, he was relieved. Not understanding the necessity of the cross, the Lord’s battered face and bound hands brought him relief. His fear and curiosity turned to contempt. The Man he once feared, he now

388 Klaas Schilder, Christ on Trial, 407. There is some speculation regarding the color of the robe that was placed on Jesus. Some writers speculate that the robe was white because the Greek word (lampros) used to describe it means literally “bright/shining/radiant.” “The medieval writers delight to dwell on the fact that Herod arrayed our Lord in white and afterwards Pilate clothed Him in red. Is he not the Lily of the Valley and the Rose of Sharon? Is he not matchlessly white for innocence, and then gloriously red in his atoning blood? Thus, in their very mockery, they are unconsciously setting forth to us both his spotless holiness and his majestic royalty.” (Charles H. Spurgeon, “Our Lord before Herod” 28:105) While the belief that the robe was white has a long standing tradition, there is no good reason from the Greek text to make that assumption. Any expensive cloth that was shiny and bright whether white, yellow or red, etc. could have been used. It is likely that Jesus was dressed in a gorgeous purple robe to mock His kingship and after He was taken back to Pilate the same robe was used by the soldiers of Pilate. Pilate’s soldiers would not use their own expensive material and certainly they would not ask Pilate for some of his expensive cloth.
considered to be a fool; a man worthy of ridicule; a man willing to suffer and die for nothing. First Pilate and now Herod looked upon Jesus as a misguided religious fanatic, a fantasy king of nothing, a man of supreme absurdity. Thus Christ was “a reproach of men, and despised by the people” (Ps. 22:6).

As our Lord moved closer to the cross, His humiliation deepened. Although Luke says nothing about physical abuse in Herod’s court, the soul sufferings of Jesus no doubt were great. The sinless, “delicate and sensitive mind of our Master was perhaps, more touched by what he suffered in the palace of Herod than by the rougher [physical] torture.”

The fact that Herod went from curiosity to open contempt and derision regarding Christ should not come as a surprise. Many people who express curiosity about the Savior and Christianity for a time and even attend church for a while turn upon the Master and reject Him. In their rejection of the truth they feel the need not simply to walk away, but also to ridicule. We often encounter reprobates who make fun of the Bible; who use pseudo-scientific theories to laugh at the teachings of Scripture.

Why do people who reject Jesus also think that there is a need to ridicule and insult Him? The answer to this question lies in the fact that, deep down, people know that what they are rejecting is true and therefore they must convince themselves that they are going down the right path. “The case of Herod is not uncommon; there are many who once received good impressions, and who once struggled with strong convictions, who are now grown hard, scornful and hostile. They would not obey the truth, and therefore they tried to disbelieve it, and they have succeeded. Now, alas! No sermons make them tremble, no afflictions touch their hearts, they are steeled against warnings and persuasions, against mercies and judgments.”

It is a dreadful thing when men willfully deceive themselves and sear their own consciences with a hot iron.

The self-deception involved in convincing oneself to push the truth out of one’s mind has saturated every aspect of our wicked anti-Christian culture. This reality is evident in how secular humanistic scientists twist the abundant, perspicuous evidences for creation into proofs for macro-evolution. Their methodology and findings reveal their vitriolic hostility to the doctrine of creation and orthodox Christianity that stands upon it. They ridicule creation *ex nihilo* by an infinite personal God, while they argue that man is the descendant of pond scum. They embrace that which is unscientific and absurd because they do not want to answer to a holy, righteous God who judges sin and because they want to take the place of God. They want to determine what is right or wrong. They mock the God of the Bible to assert their godhood as the pinnacle of evolution. “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (Jn. 3:19-20).

(5) There is a compatibility among wicked men. Luke says, “That very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for previously they had been at enmity with each other (Lk. 23:12). There had been a longstanding rift between Herod and Pilate. Yet with the trial of Jesus there is a change of relationship for the better. “The cause of the enmity between these two men is unknown. Some think it may have been the massacre of the Galileans. Luke xiii.1. It probably grew out of conflict in regard to their respective jurisdictions…. The courteous act of Pilate in sending Jesus to be tried before Herod, and the equally courteous return made by the Galilean prince in remanding Jesus to Pilate’s judgment-seat, it would appear, furnished the occasion for the renewal of friendship. Both these men agreed in despising Jesus, and insulting

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Him, and were utterly unbelieving as to His claim to faith and respect.” The circumstances of the trial and this reconciliation were something that deeply struck the apostolic church. They understood that in it part of the twenty-second Psalm was fulfilled (see Acts 4:23-30).

It is a common thing for men of very different worldviews, personalities and faiths to join themselves together in opposition to Christ. The reason for this is that the gospel is the mortal enemy to falsehood whatever its form. In modern times the atheistic naturalist is often found rubbing shoulders with people who hold the most absurd, superstitious beliefs such as astrology, reincarnation, auras, witchcraft and the like. The atheistic socialist/communist movement in America has merged with the left-wing hippie earth-worshippers in opposing the Savior and His law-Word. They have a common interest in their hatred of the resurrected King. In state schools, which claim to be neutral toward religion, children are taught how wonderful and superior the American Indians were despite their rank idolatry and crass superstitions. They are instructed in the “beautiful” culture of Islam and so forth. Yet, Christianity is scorned as a religion for close-minded fools. Men whose covenant father is Satan are willing to lay aside their differences in order to oppose Jesus Christ and His gospel. The Pharisees joined with the Sadducees in opposition to the Master. The Jews joined forces with pagan Rome against God’s Anointed. Today the secular humanists have joined together with eastern mystics, African-American modernist Baptists, Protestant liberals, Roman Catholics and Gaia worshiping hippies against the cause of God and Christ. It is important that the church of Christ is aware of this fact so that we are not complicit in the pluralism that is out to destroy us.

Chapter 10: The Civil Trial of Christ—Barabbas Chosen over Jesus

Now at that feast he released unto them one prisoner, whomsoever they desired. And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection. And the multitude crying aloud began to desire him to do as he had ever done unto them. But Pilate answered them, saying, “Will ye that I release unto you the King of the Jews?” For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy. But the chief priests moved the people, that he should rather release Barabbas unto them. And Pilate answered and said again unto them, “What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the King of the Jews?” They said, “Barabbas.” Pilate saith unto them, “What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?” They all say unto him, “Let him be crucified.” And the governor said, “Why, what evil

hath he done?” But they cried out the more, saying, “Let him be crucified.” When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, “I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it.” Then answered all the people, and said, “His blood be on us, and on our children.” Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. (Matthew 27:16-26)

And Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, Said unto them, “Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people: and, behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse him: No, nor yet Herod: for I sent you to him; and, lo, nothing worthy of death is done unto him. I will therefore chastise him, and release him.” (For of necessity he must release one unto them at the feast.) And they cried out all at once, saying, “Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas:” (Who for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison.) Pilate therefore, willing to release Jesus, spake again to them. But they cried, saying, “Crucify him, crucify him.” And he said unto them the third time, “Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him, and let him go.” And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that he might be crucified. And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed. And Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they required. And he released unto them him that for sedition and murder was cast into prison, whom they had desired; but he delivered Jesus to their will. (Luke 23:13-25)

After humiliating Christ, Herod sends our Lord back to Pilate and his jurisdiction (Lk. 23:11). Pilate calls together the chief priests, the rulers and the people (Lk. 23:13). The mention of the people indicates that Pilate wants to make a public pronouncement. Perhaps the governor (in light of the favorable treatment of Jesus during His triumphal entry on the previous Sunday) believed the masses would be useful in setting the innocent Savior free. “The crowd was momentarily increasing from the town. It was not only to see what was about to happen, but to witness another spectacle, that of the release of a prisoner. For it seems to have been the custom, that at the Passover the Roman governor released to the Jewish population some notorious prisoner who lay condemned to death.” After the crowd is assembled Pilate states the accusations of the Jews (i.e. inciting the people to rebellion); says that he has examined the case (“The term is used in the technical sense of having gone through a legal examination.”); and then finds the Savior innocent for the second time (cf. Lk. 23:4). He even adds that Herod has not found anything wrong with Jesus. For both Pilate and Herod, it was obvious that Christ had done nothing worthy of death. Pilate then, attempting to meet the Jewish leadership half-way, proposes punishing the Lord. The Greek word used, translated “punished,” can mean “scourge.” Given the fact, however, that Pilate had not yet sentenced Jesus to death the physical punishment under Roman law would not have been as severe as scourging. Pilate, by his announcement and proposed chastisement of the Savior, was attempting to set the Lord free and satisfy the Jewish leadership’s lust for blood at the same time. But, the priests and elders would have none of it; they made it very clear that Jesus must die. At this point Pilate is getting desperate. On the one hand he wants to let his innocent prisoner go; on the other hand, if the Jewish leaders stir up

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392 Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 2:576.
394 An expert in ancient Roman law writes, “The synoptic writers thus get their technicalities right in this small matter—the severe beating accompanies the capital sentence, and the lighter whipping goes with the proposed act of coercito” (A. N. Sherwin-White, Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament, 28).
the people and cause a riot, Pilate (given his past failings in dealing with the Jews) could lose his job. Consequently, Pilate comes up with a plan that he believes is foolproof. He will take advantage of a Passover custom (Jn. 18:39) and let the Jewish people decide what to do with Jesus. If the Jewish masses set the Savior free, then the chief priests and rulers cannot do anything about it. If they send the Messiah to the cross, then the governor can soothe his conscience by laying the blame for the crucifixion of Christ at the feet of the Jews. “He already knew that it was because of envy that the chief priests had delivered Jesus to him, envy aroused by the Nazarene’s popularity. So he probably reasoned as follows: ‘I will give the people a choice between Jesus and a dangerous criminal, namely, Barabbas. Surely, they will choose to have Jesus released. Why, even the leaders cannot with consistency ask for the release of a violent, murderous insurrectionist, since just a little while ago they were accusing Jesus of insurrection! And as to the crowd, I know how they will vote. With them Jesus is very popular, as was shown even a few days ago (in connection with the triumphal entry).’”

Who Is Barabbas?

Regarding Barabbas little is known. Matthew refers to him as a notorious (episemon) prisoner. This word can have either a good sense or a bad sense. To the Romans, no doubt Barabbas was “notorious” as an evil doer; but to the Jews he may well have been “notable, well known” or even “popular.” Mark says that Barabbas was an “insurrectionist” or “rebels” who had committed murder during a rebellion (Mk. 15:7). John adds that Barabbas was also a robber (Jn. 18:40). Barabbas “was one of that numerous and constantly growing party who detested the Roman rule, and who afterward gained such notoriety as the Zealots.” He “was a member of the local resistance movement. Because of his opposition to the Romans he would be a hero to many of the Jews, and they had no hesitation in preferring him to the Galilean.” All the gospels emphasize his wicked character. He was a bold brigand and murderer who likely justified his actions because they were politically motivated.

The Choice of the Mob

Pilate had placed the choice between freeing Barabbas and Jesus in the hands of the multitude, perhaps believing the people would not listen to their own rulers and religious leaders. The governor probably believed that the people would let the Savior go free. Pilate, however,
was gravely mistaken because he did not know God’s plan nor the deceitfulness and depravity of the human heart. “Here was Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, determined to release the Saviour, yet [was] prevented from doing so. From all eternity God had decreed that Pilate should sentence His Son to death, and all earth and hell combined could not thwart the purpose of the Almighty—He could not be all-mighty if they could! Christ was ‘delivered up (Greek) by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God’ (Acts 2:23).” As we all know, the covenant people rejected the Messiah and asked Pilate to set Barabbas free. This tragic event raises some important questions. Why would the covenant people set a wicked man who was a murderer, brigand and revolutionary free and condemn a perfectly innocent man to death? Also, what are some important applications that can be learned from these events?

Regarding the primary question there are some important things to consider. (1) We see the influence of the wicked Jewish leaders upon the people. The gospels emphasize that the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus (Mk. 27:22, 26). A little later, the leaders were the first to cry out for crucifixion (Jn. 19:6). The chief priests and elders were like demonic cheerleaders calling on the people to cry out “Crucify Him” (Jn. 19:6; Mk. 15:13, 15; Lk. 23:21) or “Let Him be crucified” (Mt. 27:22, 26). We must not forget the ability of religious and political leaders to have an effect on their countrymen either for good or for ill. One of the great themes of the Old Testament is how the kings of Israel who were wicked led the nation into idolatry. Repeatedly, God will tell us that a king was guilty of doing evil in the sight of the Lord and “in his sin by which he made Israel sin” (1 Kg. 15:26, 34; 16:19, 26, 31; 22:52; 2 Kg. 3:3; 10:29; 13:2, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 29; 17:21-22).

People very often have a paternal mind set toward the state and implicitly trust in what their leaders are doing. Therefore, rulers can lead many people into great evil. In modern times Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler are obvious examples of this principle. Consequently, believers who live in a secular state that is hostile to the faith need to be aware of this tendency and guard against following a political leader to do evil. In America believers have been very naive when it comes to political leaders and have repeatedly been used by both major political parties to further a pagan statist agenda. Modernist “Christians” and so-called neo-evangelicals have been lap dogs to degenerate socialists, communists and liberal democrats. Many evangelicals and fundamentalists have faithfully served the milder idolatry and statism of the Republican Party. It is very important that Christians study the Bible and Christian doctrine and learn to apply biblical principles to all aspects of life. Solid, knowledgeable, faithful believers who spend time in front of the Word instead of the television will not easily be used by wicked politicians and church leaders.

The manipulation of the multitude by the chief priests and elders raises another interesting question. Was this crowd that demanded the crucifixion of Christ the same group or largely the same group that, only days before, praised the Savior as He made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem? There are two different opinions regarding this matter. Some scholars believe that the crowd screaming for the crucifixion of the Nazarene was a different group than those who joyfully greeted Jesus when He rode into Jerusalem. These men argue that since the arrest was secret, the disciples had fled and the Jewish trial was carried out during the night, that few of Christ’s supporters were in that crowd. Some commentators even speculate that a crowd of Barabbas’ supporters had gathered with the intention of demanding the insurrectionist’s release (e.g., Cranfield, Barclay).

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Others argue that indeed many of the same people who lauded Jesus when He entered the city were now the very same people calling for His death. This is the better interpretation for the following reasons. a) The Savior was a well-known figure and word would have traveled fast through the streets of Jerusalem of His trial before Pilate. b) When the apostles preached the gospel after Pentecost they made very broad statements of condemnation to the inhabitants of Jerusalem (e.g., “…Jesus who you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you and killed the prince of life” [Ac. 3:13-15; cf. 2:36]). c) Most of the people who praised the Savior when He entered Jerusalem were viewing Him through their own carnal concepts of the kingdom. They were expecting a military-political leader, a mighty conqueror; not a humiliated, beaten man in chains. When they realized that Christ was not going to meet their expectations, it was not hard for the chief priests and elders to turn them against Him. The Jewish leaders probably argued that He was an imposter, a false Messiah, a magician. They would capitalize on the people’s messianic expectations and argue: “How in the world can this beaten, bruised, bloodied, spit-covered mess in chains be the Christ—the deliverer of Israel?” d) Further, Pilate was an extremely unpopular figure among the Jews. Who were the people going to listen to? Their own political and religious leaders or this hated Roman pagan oppressor?

e) Further, the Jewish leaders likely capitalized on an interruption in the proceedings. Matthew 27:19 indicates that Pilate was interrupted by his wife who had a dream about Jesus. When the governor stepped aside to talk to his wife, the chief priests and elders worked the crowd so they would release Barabbas instead of Jesus. Although some commentators believe the message was delivered to Pilate publicly, it is more likely that the message from his wife was heard in secret. If this is the case, then we see here the special providence of God in sending this dream to Pilate’s wife, not only as another testimony to the innocence of the Savior, but also to give the Sanhedrin more of an opportunity to pervert the people and increase their guilt.

The result of the leaders’ influence is, “And they all cried out at once saying, ‘Away with the Man, and release to us Barabbas’” (Lk. 23:18; cf. Jn. 18:40). The people are so cooperative in condemning the Savior they do not merely ask for the release of Barabbas; but actively spew hatred toward the Messiah. “Away with this Man”—“Get rid of Him; get Him out of our sight; take Him off the face of this earth; put Him to death.”

(2) Let us consider why the people were so easily convinced to turn upon our Lord and release Barabbas. There are two primary spiritual reasons why this occurred. a) The people who had cheered Jesus and were now crying out for His death were unregenerate. They were carnal professors of religion. If there was a true work of the Holy Spirit upon their heart, then they would have evidenced it by a faith and love toward their Messiah. They would never have listened to the voice of Satan speaking lies through their religious and political leaders. Thus, we see that Israel’s heart of stone, blind eyes and deaf ears were used in God’s providence to save the whole world. As Paul says, “Just as it is written: ‘God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day’” (Rom. 11:8).

As noted, the unregenerate can be impressed by signs, wonders and popularity. However, their profession is shallow; it has no root. Therefore, it is very fickle and liable to change. Many of us have encountered people who floated about on every wind of doctrine. Let us therefore beware that we are not unregenerate, shallow-ground hearers who end up rejecting Christ because our hearts are still in love with this present evil age. “The service of sin and the service of God are continually before us. The friendship of the world and the friendship of Christ are
continually pressed upon our notice.** Are we going to evidence a new heart by continuing to cling to Jesus through thick and thin; or, will we follow the crowd into perdition?

b) Also, the Jews rejected their Messiah because of their unbiblical theology. They welcomed the Savior into the city with open arms and shouts of praise when they believed He would crush the Romans and rule upon a literal throne in Jerusalem like King David. But when they encountered the suffering Servant in His supreme state of humiliation and learned that Christ was not *that* kind of a king; they wanted nothing to do with Him. Their professed love and admiration turned to hatred. They placed their trust in a Messiah of their own imagination and, therefore, they cast Jesus away as a worthless imposter. They had to choose between the suffering servant who conquered through his sacrificial blood, who ruled by means of the Spirit, and their worldly Caesar-Messiah who slaughtered the Gentiles like an Islamic fanatic. Tragically for them, they chose the latter.

Ironically, in this Passover release, which was supposed to honor the original Passover, the Jews completely forgot the symbolism of the slain lamb. The firstborn of the Jews were saved by the blood of lamb without spot and blemish. Instead of trusting in Christ to save them by His sinless life and vicarious sacrificial death, the Jews in essence were placing their trust for deliverance in the arm of the flesh. By choosing Barabbas they, in a sense, were choosing their future confrontation with Rome and eventual destruction. Our Lord offered salvation by faith in His person and work. Those who followed Jesus must not follow the sword of the flesh but the sword of the Spirit. Barabbas offered the Jews a kingdom founded upon self-effort, hatred and violence. The Jews’ racism, self-righteousness, and salvation through law-keeping or legalism made Barabbas the logical choice. Barabbas not only fulfilled their carnal, chiliastic dreams but also left deliverance in man’s hands, in human achievement. This surging, angry mob demanded a Messiah of their own presuppositions. And, that is precisely what they got. Barclay writes, “they chose the man of blood instead of the prince of peace…. They chose hatred and violence instead of love. Barabbas and Jesus stood for two different ways. Barabbas stood for the heart of hate, the stab of the dagger, the violence of bitterness. Jesus stood for the way of love. As so often has happened, hate reigned supreme in the hearts of men, and love was rejected.”

The Jews in their humanistic legalism chose antinomianism and pragmatism over biblical law and truth. They knew that Barabbas was a murderer and a brigand, yet they set him free. They gave freedom to Barabbas even though the law of God explicitly says, “Whoever kills any man shall surely be put to death” (Lev. 24:17; cf. Ex. 21:12ff.; Num. 35:17). According to biblical law, the man who intentionally kills another man *must* be put to death. (The only exceptions would be in the case of just warfare or self-defense). To allow a guilty murderer to go free, according to the law, was to defile the land. “So you shall not pollute the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it” (Num. 35:33). Therefore, when the Jews preferred a thief and murderer to Christ, they cursed themselves from both the law and from their Messiah. Their land was defiled and would be drenched with their own blood and the blood of their children.

Legalism (which is humanistic to the core) always sides with antinomianism against God and His law, because legalism is the attempt to reach God by one’s own effort or achievement. Thus, in the name of law (humanistically defined) they choose lawlessness. “They choose the law-breaker instead of Jesus. One of the New Testament words for sin is anomaia, which means...

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lawlessness. Because of the depravity of the human heart, men despise the lawgiver and His law. They set up gods in the place of God and humanistic laws in the place of the moral law. The Jews had to trample the law of Moses under their feet in order to reject their Messiah.

A person can only truly embrace the moral law of God by embracing the Savior because it is only in Christ that the law is fulfilled. Jesus eliminates the curse and penalty of the law by enduring the penalty in the place of the believing sinner. He also fulfills the requirement of a perpetual obedience to the moral law by perfectly obeying all of its precepts in our place. Therefore, men are justified or declared righteous by God solely on account of what the Savior has done, not on the basis of any supposed subjective righteousness, merit or good works. Only biblical Christianity truly honors the law of God.

Believers who were not raised in Christian homes know that before conversion they had much in common with the Jewish mob. While one may not have been choosing a murderer over the Messiah in one’s daily life; nevertheless, Jesus was continually being rejected in favor of one’s false gods. When we had the opportunity to look into the things of God we chose human philosophy or eastern religions because the crowd said this was cool. This was the in thing. Being spiritually blind, we did not yet see the beauties of the Savior; so, in our sinful ignorance we danced with demons and played with the trinkets of Satan. While we did this we thought we were so hip and illuminated.

When we had the opportunity to spend time with solid, true Christians we instead chose profane, frivolous friends. We didn’t want to be bored by “squares” who spoke about divine realities. They were a nuisance to our worldly, deaf ears. Our pleasure was in profane speech, in coarse jesting and frivolous meaningless nonsense. We chose worthless trash before the gospel of God. When we had the opportunity to attend public worship to hear the things of God, we instead chose the beach, the park or the baseball game. Our hearts were in tune with the world and out of tune with the truth. The crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ were less important to us than getting a tan or acquiring a new baseball card. We were without hope and without God in the world. We preferred the foul Barabbas of our lusts to the perfections of the Savior. With the crowd we cried, “Away with the gospel so that I can minister to my own fleshly delights. Jesus, get out of my existence so that I can run after sin and wallow in it like a pig.”

This was our history apart from Christ; the days of darkness when our soul went after virtually any form of evil instead of the Savior. For this reason we thank God that He reached out to our dead hearts with His precious grace. If Jesus did not send His Holy Spirit into our hearts, quickening them, then we would still choose the Barabbas of our idols over the Mediator. We know this because the natural man cannot know the spiritual things of God (1 Cor. 2:14). An unregenerate man would no more love or desire Christ than a boulder could roll up a hill. Therefore, when we contemplate our past lives of vanity and darkness, we are very thankful that God has changed our hearts to see the beauty of Christ. If it were not for God’s grace, we would be no different than those in the crowd which chose Barabbas over Jesus and shouted, “Away with Him; let Him be crucified!”

c) Another theological reason for the Jews’ rejection of Jesus was their perverted Christology. After Pilate had our Lord scourged and presented Him to the Jews, “they cried out, saying, ‘Crucify Him, crucify Him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him.’ The Jews answered him, ‘We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die because He made Himself the Son of God’” (Jn. 19:6-7).

402 Ibid, 357.
The first people to cry out “crucify” are the chief priests and their bodyguards. “The use of the verb as a one word slogan (there is nothing in the Greek corresponding to ‘him’) is a perfect mob chant of hatred. The chief priests and their henchmen lead the angry mob by example. The verb “cried out” (exrougasan) “denotes a loud shout, ‘roared’ (Dods); ‘yelled’ (Moffat).”

What is interesting regarding this episode is that the Jewish leaders in their frustration regarding Pilate’s repeated statement of the innocence of Christ go back to their original religious charge against Him. This would be the seventh and final charge by the Jews against Jesus. “First they charged Him with threatening to destroy the temple (Matt. 26:61); second, with being a ‘malefactor’ (John 18:30); third, with ‘perverting the nation’ (Luke 23:2); fourth, with ‘forbidding to give tribute to Caesar’ (Luke 23:2); fifth, with ‘stirring up all the people’ (Luke 23:5); sixth, with being ‘a king’ (Luke 23:2); seventh, with making Himself the Son of God (John 19:7). This sevenfold indictment witnessed to the completeness of their rejection of Him!”

The Jewish leadership understood that Pilate had rejected all their arguments which attempted to paint the Savior as a dangerous revolutionary. Therefore, they would try this new tactic which would change the nature of the trial.

The Jews had convicted Jesus of blasphemy in their trial before Caiaphas (Mk. 14:64; Mt. 26:65-66; Lk. 22:70-71). They, however, had up to this point ignored the blasphemy charge throughout the trial before Pilate. As noted, they believed that if the prosecution of the Savior was framed in political terms a conviction would be more easily procured. Although the Jews do not give up on their political charges (cf. Jn. 19:12), this charge regarding blasphemy is somewhat of an admission of defeat regarding the political accusations. Beasley-Murray writes,

While the Fourth Evangelist refrains from recording the trial before Caiaphas, this may be viewed as a clear echo of it; moreover he has earlier referred to the Jewish charge that Jesus made himself the Son of God and the Jews’ desire to put him to death for it (see esp. 5:17-18 and 10:30-39). Significantly the former passage links the claim to be Son of God with Jesus’ performing “signs” on the sabbath day (5:16-18); in the eyes of the Jewish teachers and rulers this brought him within the orbit of Deut. 13:1-6 and made him a false prophet, for whose activities the death penalty is laid down. We recall that this view of Jesus as a false prophet appears to lie behind the interrogation of Jesus by Annas (18:19-23), and that a reminiscence of it has been preserved in the Talmud (Yeshu was hanged “because he practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy,” Sanh. 43a). In setting forth this charge to Pilate the chief priests were not abandoning their accusation that Jesus claimed to be the king of the Jews, but rather supporting it with a religious charge of sufficient gravity to warrant his death on the basis of their law, a consideration that Pilate should not view lightly (had they so wished they could have strengthened the accusation by declaring that Jesus had made his claim to kingship in blasphemous terms). The reader, however, recognizes at once that the new charge betrays the real reason for the remorseless quest of the chief priests and Pharisees for his death. The messianic pretension was serious enough, but the claim to be Son of God, with its accompanying roles of Redeemer and Revealer, was intolerable.

This was the tragic reality—the Jews had so perverted the doctrine of the Messiah by their traditions, faulty exegesis and spiritual blindness that when the Christ came they hated Him,
persecuted Him, bore false witness against Him and used the Romans to put Him to death. If the Jews understood their own Scripture they would have known that the Messiah is “Immanuel—God with us” (Isa. 7:14); whose name will be called “the Mighty God, the everlasting Father” (Isa. 9:7); “Jehovah our Righteousness” (Jer. 23:6); “whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2). Regarding the coming Messiah the psalmist says, “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: the scepter of thy kingdom is a right scepter. Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness: therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee” (Ps. 45:6-7).

In Psalm 110 (the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament) “the Son” is set poetically in parallel with Jehovah. “The Lord said unto my Lord, ‘Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.’ The Lord shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies. Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” (vs. 1-3).

Pilate’s response to this new accusation (i.e. new for Pilate) was that “he was the more afraid” (Jn. 19:8). John says “more afraid” because Pilate was already unhinged by the Savior’s character, his wife’s dream (Mt. 27:19) and the fact that he knew Christ was innocent. For Pilate this trial was becoming a nightmare. Then, on top of all this, he hears that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. This knowledge greatly increased his fear. He was filled with dread, for he had just had this Man scourged. Among pagan Greeks and Romans at this time it was commonly believed that the gods could come to earth and appear as mortal men. We see this in Acts 14 where after a healing by Paul the heathen mob called Barnabas, Zeus and Paul, Hermes (Ac. 14:12).

This great fear results in an interesting interchange between Pilate and Jesus. Pilate takes the Savior back into the Praetorium and asks “Where are You from?” The governor wants to know whether Christ is a god or a man, from heaven or from earth. “If thou art some superior being, more than a common man, tell me plainly, that I may know how to deal with thy case. Tell me privately, while these Jews are not present, that I may know what line to take up with thine enemies”—We may well believe that Pilate caught at a secret hope that Jesus might tell him something about Himself, which would enable him to make a firm stand and deliver Him from the Jews."

John tells us that the Savior responded by keeping silent. “But Jesus gave him no answer” (Jn. 19:9). Why did our Lord refuse to answer Pilate’s question? One reason is that Christ had already spoken to Pilate about the source of His kingdom and the nature of His mission without result. The governor had not taken these deep truths from the Savior seriously at all. The main reason that the Savior was silent was that He did not want to say anything that might hinder His sufferings or cause Pilate to set Him free. “If Christ had avowed himself as God as plainly as he avowed himself king, it is probable that Pilate would not have condemned him...the Romans, though they triumphed over the kings of the nations they conquered, yet stood in awe of their gods.”

Our Lord’s refusal to answer Pilate was not something the powerful governor was used to, especially in such circumstances. As a result, Pilate was annoyed. The governor was very self-conscious about his pride and position of authority. Further, in his own twisted, cowardly way Pilate believed he was seeking a way out for Jesus. Why then, he thought, would the Nazarene remain silent and refuse to help? John records the governor’s perturbed response. “Then Pilate said to Him, ‘Are You not speaking to me? Do you not know that I have the power to crucify You, and power to release You?’” (19:10). “In the last resort it was Pilate alone who

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408 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1191.
could say ‘Crucify’ or ‘Release’, and this frank recognition of it makes nonsense of all the shifts to which he resorted in the attempt to avoid making a decision. Ultimately he could not avoid responsibility and these words show that deep down he must have realized this.”

It is in response to Pilate’s question that the Savior speaks His last words to the governor before the crucifixion. “Jesus answered, ‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin’” (Jn. 19:11). In a calm, dignified manner Christ deals with two different issues. First, He corrects Pilate’s proud claims regarding having power over Himself. The governor’s claim to an absolute power is one which ungodly tyrants are fond of making. From Caesar to Hitler and Stalin, wicked men like to think of themselves as the source of power and greatness. This reminds us of the biblical testimony regarding Nebuchadnezzar. “Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down” (Dan. 5:19). Jesus rebukes Pilate and honors His Father by telling the governor that he really has no power over him at all except the power sovereignly bestowed by the Father. Pilate believed his own power was arbitrary, intrinsic and absolute; but Jesus says it is limited by the Father’s will, subject to God’s decree. Although Pilate is responsible for his actions, the only reason Jesus stands before him in bonds is because that is what God the Father wanted. God’s providence “had allowed a man of Pilate’s stamp to be placed in the procurator’s office at this time.”

J. C. Ryle gets the meaning of the verse beautifully in the following paraphrase. “Thou talkest of power: thou dost not know that both thou and the Jews are only tools in the hands of a higher Being: you are both unconsciously, mere instruments in the hands of God.”

Therefore, the purpose of our Lord’s statement is not to give Pilate a biblical lesson in the civil magistrate’s proper responsibility toward God as God’s servant (see Rom. 13:1ff.) even though that is a legitimate application of the passage. But rather, He means to tell Pilate that no human authority, no matter how exalted, has its own power to pass judgment on the Son of God. Jesus alone has the power or authority to lay down His life (see Jn. 10:18), and Christ always obeys His Father’s will. “The fact that he is in his present position, suffering these agonies, and on his way to death is due to his own volition. Pilate is to know that it is not he who holds Jesus in his hand; a higher hand holds Pilate.”

Second, our Lord tells the governor that the one who delivered Him up has the greater sin. This refers to Caiaphas, not Judas, for the high priest acting on behalf of the Sanhedrin delivered Jesus to Pilate. Judas delivered Christ to the Jews not to the Romans. The Jewish leaders (in particular Caiaphas) were guilty of a greater sin because their sin was a sin against knowledge. They had the Scriptures which spoke clearly of their Messiah. Yet, with premeditation and careful planning, the Jews did everything in their power to kill Jesus.

Pilate is guilty of a lesser sin because, as a heathen, he had little or no knowledge about the Savior. He was ignorant of the Holy Scriptures. By an act of providence Christ came before Pilate and the governor sinned by condemning an innocent man to death to avoid a confrontation with his superiors at Rome. However, the governor did not plot the death of Christ, with all the evil deception and satanic cunning that involved. As bad as Pilate’s sin was, the Jews’ sin was much worse. Lampe writes, “Pilate could have only heard something about our Lord’s great miracles by rumor and report: they were all done under the very eyes of the Jews. Pilate injured

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Jesus unwillingly, and from cowardice: they injured Him from hatred and envy. Finally, Pilate was only the instrument: the Jews were the impelling cause. Thus our Lord pronounces His opinion concerning His judges, an opinion according to which He will one day judge them.”

Jesus’ statement is significant and remarkable for two reasons. First, the Savior explicitly teaches that there are different degrees of sin, some greater and some lesser, and by implication greater and lesser degrees of punishment. This ought to be a sobering doctrine to everyone in the visible church, for those who have the greater knowledge will suffer a much greater degree of punishment in hell if they apostatize from the faith. This point should especially be pressed upon covenant children who appear lukewarm in their love of Christ and spiritual things. Everyone who has been set apart in the visible church and has had the privilege of sitting under the doctrines of grace must be diligent in making sure they are sound in the faith and orthodox in their walk.

Second, the Savior, though in a supreme state of humiliation, calmly speaks as the judge of all the earth. The One who stands meekly before Pilate battered, bruised and bloodied is the judge of all mankind. Even in the midst of His intense suffering, our Lord was very conscious of His glorious victory. “Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). As we suffer persecution unjustly for our faith in Christ we must endure it with patience and look to Jesus, the judge of all mankind. He will give the due recompense of reward on that day.

That our Lord’s words to Pilate had a strong effect upon him can be deduced from John 19:12: “From then on Pilate sought to release Him.” Obviously the governor had wished to set the Savior free for quite some time. But now with the Lord speaking as the judge of Pilate and the Jews, there is an even stronger determination to set Jesus free. Although Christ refused to answer the question regarding His deity, His statement regarding sin and judgment had a profound effect upon the governor. He knew that Jesus had an authority beyond that of mortal men and this terrified Pilate.

(3) This choosing of Barabbas over Christ sets forth the sin of unregenerate men throughout history to this present day. In the Roman Empire the state tolerated every form of idolatry and perversion: chattel slavery, prostitution, sodomy, murder, gladiatorial slaughter and oppression. But there was one thing that could not be allowed: the worship and service of Jesus Christ as the Lord over lords. The innocent, humble followers of the Savior had to be removed from the face of the earth. They were slaughtered in the thousands simply for bowing the knee to the resurrected King and refusing to offer worship to Caesar. The cry of pagan Rome was “Away with this fellow. We have no king but Caesar!” “[P]agans called Christians ‘dregs of the people’ and ‘insolent barbarians,’ accused them of ‘hatred of the human race,’ and ascribed the misfortunes of the Empire to the anger of pagan deities whose Christian revilers had been allowed to live…. Tertullian notes ‘the general hatred felt for us’ {Apol.,iv,I}. From the time of Nero Roman law seems to have branded the profession of Christianity as a capital offense…”

In the middle ages when the church had become nominally Christian and thoroughly corrupt, the unregenerate masses chose the pope of Rome, a wicked antichrist over the spotless Son of God. Spurgeon writes,

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The world chose the harlot of Rome, and she who was drunk with the wine of her abominations had every eye to gaze upon her with admiration, while Christ’s gospel was forgotten, buried in a few old books, and almost extinguished in darkness. Since that day the world has changed its tactics yet again; in many parts of the earth Protestantism is openly acknowledged, and the gospel is preached, but what then? Then comes Satan, and another Barabbas, the Barabbas of mere ceremonialism, and mere attendance at a place of worship is set up. “Yes, we are orthodox; so orthodox, so sound. Yes, we are religious, strictly religious; we attend our meeting-house, or go to our Church. We are never absent. We attend every form, but we have no vital godliness; we have not been born again; we have not passed from death unto life.” However, this will do; so long as we are as good as our neighbors, and keep the outward rite, the inward does not matter. This which is a foul robbery of God’s glory, this which murders men’s souls, is the Barabbas of the present age. An outward name to live is set up, and is received by those who are dead; and many of you now present are quite easy and content, though you have never felt the quickening Spirit of God: though you have never been washed in the atoning blood, yet you are satisfied because you take a seat in some place of worship; you give your guinea, your donation to an hospital, or your subscription to a good object, forgetting and not caring to remember that all the making clean of the outside of the cup and the platter will never avail, unless the inward nature be renewed by the Spirit of the living God. This is the great Barabbas of the present age, and men prefer it before the Saviour.\(^1\)

\(^{415}\) Charles H. Spurgeon, “Barabbas Preferred to Jesus,” 10:590.

(4) We will use the story of Jesus and Barabbas as an opportunity to study the vicarious nature of our Lord’s suffering. The Savior who was sinless and perfectly innocent was sent to the cross in the place of Barabbas who was guilty and deserved to be put to death. As we look at the vicarious nature of our Lord’s work, we do so as an application of our text; for there is no Scriptural evidence that Jesus died as a surety for Barabbas. (The word surety refers to one who legally takes upon himself the guilt and liability of punishment for the sins of another.) We never see the Mediator praying or pleading for Barabbas as He does for Peter. There is no biblical evidence that Barabbas ever repented and became part of the Jerusalem church. While it is possible He converted to Christ later on in life, we will never really know; the hidden things belong to the Lord. Further, (as noted) the tradition of the Jewish law of release which set Barabbas free was contrary to God’s law. The law of release was purely arbitrary; there was no biblical law in it.

The Bible teaches that in order to remove the guilt and penalty for sin, Jesus took upon Himself all the guilt for our sins and the full penalty that we deserved. In other words, He suffered in our place as our substitute. Berkhof notes why a substitutionary atonement is our only hope:

There is a difference between personal and vicarious atonement. We are interested particularly in the difference between the two in connection with the atonement of Christ. When man fell away from God, he as such owed God reparation. But he could atone for his sin only by suffering eternally the penalty affixed to transgression. This is what God might have required in strict justice, and would have required, if He had not been actuated by love and compassion for the sinner. As a matter of fact, however, God appointed a vicar in Jesus Christ to take man’s place, and this vicar atoned for sin and obtained an eternal redemption for man. Dr. Shedd calls attention to the following points of difference in this case: (1) Personal atonement is provided by the offending party; vicarious atonement by offended party. (2) Personal atonement would have excluded the element of mercy; vicarious atonement represents the highest form of mercy.
(3) Personal atonement would have been forever in the making and hence could not result in redemption; vicarious atonement leads to reconciliation and life everlasting.416

There are many passages in Scripture that teach that Christ bore the sins of His people. “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:4-6). “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). “Christ also suffered for us...who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed” (1 Pet. 2:21, 24).

The Greek prepositions that are used in connection with Christ’s death clearly teach a vicarious atonement. Jesus said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom for [anti] many” (Mt. 20:28; cf. Mk. 10:45). The preposition anti means literally “in the place of” or “in exchange for.” Christ came “to give His life in the place of many”. The same Greek preposition is used in Matthew 5:38 where it says, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” which means “an eye in exchange for an eye and a tooth in exchange for a tooth.” It is also used in Matthew 2:22 where it says “that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod.”

Most passages which speak of Christ’s death employ the more ambiguous preposition huper. “This cup is the new covenant in My blood which is shed for [huper] you” (Lk. 22:19, 20). “Christ also suffered...the just for the unjust” (1 Pet. 3:18; cf. Jn. 6:51; 15:13; Rom. 5:6-8; 8:32; 2 Cor. 5:14-15, 21; Gal. 3:13; Eph 5:2, 25; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; Heb. 2:9). The preposition huper is very similar to our English preposition, for. It has a wide meaning and thus does not always denote substitution. Sometimes it has the sense of, “for the benefit of” and at other times, it can mean “in the place of.” Shedd argues that the New Testament authors often employed the preposition huper because they wanted to emphasize both points: “that Christ died in the sinner’s place, and for the sinner’s benefit.”417 One’s interpretation, of course, must be determined by the context. Theological liberals, who reject the substitutionary atonement (because it does not fit in with their humanistic presuppositions regarding God, sin, and salvation), used to argue that huper could not possibly mean “instead of.” Archeological discoveries, however, have once again proved the liberals wrong. Several inscriptions have been found that have huper with the meaning “as representative of.”418 Clark notes recent discoveries that use huper of professional “scribes who wrote for and instead of his employer.”419 The biblical doctrine of a vicarious atonement or a substitutionary sacrifice cannot be denied.

Christ’s suffering and death was done in the place of His people. Jesus stood in the place of the sinner, bore his sin and was punished in the sinner’s stead. But how was the sinner’s sin placed upon Christ on the cross? The Bible teaches that whoever believes in Jesus has his sins

418 Deissman, Light from the Ancient East as quoted by Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 377.
Paul says, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). This does not mean that Christ became a sinner or a wicked person, for such a teaching would contradict the many passages which teach that Christ was sinless and ethically perfect (e.g., Jn. 8:46; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Jn. 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22). What it means is that “the guilt of sin as liability to punishment was imputed to Christ [or reckoned to His account]; and this could be transferred, because it did not inhere in the person of the sinner, but was something objective.” Thus Peter could say, He “bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24).

The doctrine of vicarious sacrifice and the imputation of the guilt of sin is clearly taught in the Old Testament sacrificial ritual that involved the sinner laying (or literally in Hebrew, “pressing”) his hand upon the head of the sacrificial animal immediately prior to its sacrifice. “If his offering is a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD. Then he shall put his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him” (Lev. 1:3-4; cf. 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24; 16:21). Theological liberals (who always seem to be running from the truth of God’s infallible Word) argue that this ritual merely symbolizes a declaration or setting apart of the supplicant’s property to God. Their theory, however, is disproved both from the analogy of Scripture and from the fact that the laying on and pressing of the hand does not occur in the bloodless cake or cereal offerings. The symbolism of the pressing of the hand on the sacrificial victim indicates both substitution (the clean animal will suffer and die in the sinner’s place) and the transfer or imputation of guilt (or liability) to the animal. This interpretation is decisively confirmed by Leviticus 16:21: “and Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and shall send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a suitable man.” Moorehead writes, “Most specific and definite is the language touching this remarkable scene. The high priest laid both his hands on the goat’s head. In the other sacrifices where a single individual performed this act it was his hand, one hand, that made the transfer; but here both hands were employed: the hands that had been filled with incense, that carried the blood into the Divine Presence, are now filled with the sins, iniquities and transgressions of the congregation, and these hands put them all on the head of the victim! Substitution and imputation cannot be more vividly expressed.”

The biblical teaching regarding Christ’s suffering and death being substitutionary raises an important question. Why is this doctrine important to us? It is important because: a) It tells us that God never overlooks sin. He either punishes sin in Jesus, the sinless substitute, or in the sinner himself. The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23) and the curse and suffering of hell (Gal. 3:13; Rev. 20:12-15). Someone has to pay the price. This means that the issue as to whether or not to look to Christ for salvation is not merely academic, but crucial to our whole future.

b) The doctrine of our Lord’s vicarious atonement makes the gospel very personal. It is not enough simply to say that Jesus died on the cross almost two thousand years ago or even that the Savior died for sinners. We must believe and confess that Christ suffered and died for us.

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420 Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 377. God has a perfect and complete record of every sin that you have ever committed. “And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books” (Rev. 20:12). Thus, the guilt and liability for sin is objective. When theologians discuss the sinful nature inherent in the children of Adam, they talk about the pollution of sin. The progressive subduing of the pollution of sin in believers is called sanctification.

gospel is not, “Ask Jesus to come and live in your heart.” It rather is, “Are you trusting in the person and work of Christ, that He suffered and died in your place, for your sins?” Although modernists reject it and evangelicals often neglect it, vicarious atonement is at the heart of the gospel.

Fifth, we must examine the supreme humiliation of Christ in the rejection by the Jews. Pilate, who was trying to rid himself of Jesus by this placement of Barabbas next to the Savior on the pavement, did not realize that God was using his cowardice and indecisiveness to take His Son a step lower in His state of humiliation. In this pairing of men before Israel—one the sinless Son of God, the other a thief and murderer—the nation was given a clear choice between their Messiah and ethical scum. It would be Israel’s choice of Barabbas over the Savior that would sharpen our Lord’s suffering as He went to the cross. He went to the cross as a thoroughly rejected man despised by the people (Isa. 53:3; Jn. 1:11). There are a number of things that make this rejection particularly humiliating.

a) Unlike their ancestors who for a time in part rejected David for the tall, handsome, smooth-talking Absalom, the Jews rejected Jesus for an everyday lawless thug. Barabbas was a worthless man. This fact didn’t matter to the Jews for they would choose anyone over their Messiah.

b) The Jews (as noted above) were not only rejecting Christ but also rejecting His three and a half years of teaching and ministry. The Man who had preached good tidings, healed the sick and fed the poor was cast off as refuse unto the tortures of Rome. The Jews chose the unthinking violence of Barabbas over the spiritual freedom of Jesus. They chose revolution over the gospel, hate over love, works over grace, the carnal sword over the Word of God. Everything our Lord stood for was despised and cast aside.

c) They rejected Jesus publicly in a court of law. It would be one thing if the Jews disliked the Savior and murmured against Him under their breath. But here the people that Jesus delivered from Egypt; who were privileged to receive the law-covenant; who were led through the wilderness and given the promised land; these people were crying out openly and publicly against Him. Their apostasy was at its peak. The Son of the vineyard owner has come and they say, “Come, let us kill him” (Mk. 12:7).

d) They not only rejected Him but they pleaded with Pilate for His crucifixion. They actively were crying out against Him. Not only did they demand the death of Christ, but they specifically requested a gruesome, exceedingly humiliating and painful form of execution—crucifixion. They demanded a means of death that involved a divine curse (Deut. 21:23). The people who Christ so faithfully served were seething in hatred against Him.

Chapter 11: The Civil Trial of Christ—“Behold the Man”

Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him. And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on him a purple robe, and said, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they smote him with their hands. Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, “Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him.” Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, “Behold the man!” When the chief priests therefore and officers saw him, they cried out, saying,
“Crucify him, crucify him.” Pilate saith unto them, “Take ye him, and crucify him: for I find no fault in him.” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God.” When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he was the more afraid; and went again into the judgment hall, and saith unto Jesus, “Whence art thou?” But Jesus gave him no answer. Then saith Pilate unto him, “Speakest thou not unto me? Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?” Jesus answered, “Thou couldst have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.” And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him: but the Jews cried out, saying, “If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar.” When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha. And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, “Behold your King!” But they cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him.” Pilate saith unto them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led him away. (John 19:1-16)

Pilate’s attempt to set Jesus free by the use of the custom of the release of a prisoner was an abysmal failure. The people wanted Barabbas to go free, not the Savior. The governor, however, was not yet ready to give up his idea of manipulating matters so that the Jews themselves would allow the Nazarene to go free. In this final attempt Pilate would appeal to their pity and sense of mercy. He would have Christ flogged and mocked, hoping the ghastly sight of a severely beaten, bloodied and humiliated man would cause the Jewish people to feel sorry for Jesus. Further, the Jews’ desire that our Lord be punished would hopefully be satiated and the penalty of crucifixion could be avoided. Pilate, as we shall see was guilty here of underestimating the hatred of the Jews for the Savior. There would be no cries of mercy for the Nazarene. Pilate’s attempt simply resulted in more bold cries of “Crucify Him.”

Before we examine this section of Scripture we need to note the apparent discrepancy between John’s account and that of the synoptics Mark (15:15) and Matthew (27:26), which appear to place the scourging immediately after the sentence of crucifixion. There are a number of reasons as to why there is no discrepancy between John and the two synoptics. First, the discrepancy only appears because Mark and Matthew give an abbreviated record of events at that point, while John goes into much greater detail. “Mark’s past participle, phragellosas (‘after flogging him’), indicates that the death sentence was passed only after his scourging (Blinzler, 334). If that be so Mark, Matthew, and John all record the events in question…in the same order—only John interposes other happenings, of which the synoptics appear to know nothing…”422 Second, our first point is supported by the fact that both Mark and Matthew do not record the actual sentence of crucifixion. They merely record the events of the scourging and the delivery to be crucified in their proper chronological order leaving others to fill in the details. “Scourging was standard practice before a crucifixion and the Synoptics mention it accordingly. But it is only John who lets us see ‘that Jesus was not scourged in order to be crucified but in order to escape crucifixion’ (Lenski).”423

422 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 335.
In desperation, Pilate hands Christ over to be scourged. Scourging was always the normal punishment before crucifixion. The Roman concept of execution was that it should be as horrifying as possible as a deterrent to crime. That is why scourging was an integral part of the execution process. Pilate (as noted) at this time hoped that the horrible effect of scourging upon the Nazarene would elicit pity from the Jews. If it didn’t, then the Savior was already set for execution. The Greek word for scourging *phragelloo* (Mt. 27:26, *phragellosas*) “is a loanword from the Latin *flagello*, and denotes flogging with whips normally made of leather and sometimes weighted with pieces of metal or bone.” John uses the original Greek expression *mastiogoun*.

The procedure for scourging in the first century is well documented by Roman historians (e.g., Josephus, Eusebius, Cicero, Suetonius). The victim would first be stripped down to his loincloth. Then his feet would be secured behind his body to rings or posts. His body was bent forward with his arms around a pillar and secured on the other side of the pillar exposing the victim’s back. A strong soldier was given a short handled whip that contained several leather strips or “lashes.” At the ends of the lashes were secured pieces of bone and/or metal which would tear the flesh. “The strokes were laid on with full force, and when the executioners tired, the officers shouted: *Adde virgas!* (Livy 26, 16), or: *Firme!* (Suetonius, Caligula 26), demanding more force. The effect was horrible. The skin and the flesh of the back were gashed to the very bone, and where the armed ends of the lashes struck, deep, bloody holes were torn. When Jesus, the son of Ananus, who cried woe over Jerusalem, was scourged by the procurator Albinus, ‘he was whipped until his bones were laid bare,’ Josephus, *Wars*, 6, 6, 3. In Smyrna just before Polycarp’s martyrdom a number of other martyrs were scourged until, as Eusebius 4, 15 reports, the deepest veins and the arteries were exposed, and even the inner organs of the body were seen.” It was not uncommon for victims to die from this brutal procedure. While the gospel accounts spare us from the details of our Lord’s beating, we know that this scourging was so severe that Jesus was unable to carry the cross all the way to the site of execution. Thus, Simon of Cyrene was ordered by the soldiers to carry Christ’s cross (Mk. 15:21; Lk. 23:26; Mt. 27:32).

This scourging took place at the Praetorium or common hall. “The ‘Pillar of the Scourging’ is now shown in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but in the fourth century it was shown to the Bordeaux Pilgrim in the traditional house of Caiaphas.” The original pillar to which our Lord was bound was at the Praetorium and likely did not survive the destruction of Jerusalem. “The soldiers took Him to a room in their barracks, and feasted their cruel instincts on His sufferings. We will not describe the shame and pain of this revolting punishment. What it must have been to Him, with His honor and love for human nature, to be handled by those coarse men, and to look so closely at human nature’s uttermost brutality!” Indeed, scourging was so brutal that the Romans called it the intermediate death.

What is so significant about this scourging is that here is the first shedding of blood of the Savior. In Gethsemane Jesus was in such heart agony and distress that He sweated great drops of blood. This blood was pressed out of Him on account of His soul sufferings alone. After the Jewish trial no doubt some blood was shed from our Lord’s nose and mouth when He was beaten

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by the temple guards (Mk. 14:65; Mt. 26:67-68; Lk. 22:63-64). But here with the cruel torture of scourging, the Son of God’s blood flowed freely in streams down His back, sides and legs. The Savior’s blood and pieces of His flesh were sprinkled throughout the Praetorium. Heathen dogs were tearing the Lord’s flesh. Sinful men were pounding the blood from His body. This is significant, for the Bible says “without the shedding of blood there is no remission” (Heb. 9:22).

The prophet Isaiah refers explicitly to Christ’s scourging when he says, “But He was wounded for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). Edward J. Young’s comments on this passage are excellent:

The sins we had committed were borne by the servant. Inasmuch as sin, however, is something immaterial, how can one be said to bear it? The answer is that sin involves not merely an inward corruption of the heart but also guilt before God. In saying that the servant bore our sins, therefore, Isaiah is in reality declaring that he bore the guilt of our sins. Yet even guilt is intangible: but guilt involves liability both to censure and to punishment, and with this we meet the heart of the matter. When the servant bore the guilt of our sins, we are saying that he bore the punishment that was due to us because of those sins, and that is to say that he was our substitute. His punishment was vicarious. Because we had transgressed, he was pierced to death; and being pierced and crushed was the punishment that he bore in our stead. It may be that in the violence of the figures used there is a secondary reference to the actual death of the crucifixion, but the main thrust is that as our substitute he bore the penalty that was rightfully ours. If, however, the language is to have meaning, the servant must be one who was himself utterly free of transgression and iniquity, else his vicarious suffering could be of no avail. If one who himself was iniquitous bore the sins of another, then there is a travesty upon justice, for the sinbearer in this case would have need that his own sins be borne by another. Inasmuch as the vicarious suffering is for those who had transgressed God’s holy law, and inasmuch as the vicarious punishment of the servant actually sets us free in the sight of a holy God, we may say with assurance that there is only One of whom these words may be spoken, namely Jesus the Christ.428

This horrible beating was part of the seamless garment of Christ’s suffering in our place that culminated on the cross. “He was wounded for our transgressions, to make atonement for them and to purchase for us the pardon of them. Our sins were the thorns in his head, the nails in His hands and feet, the spear in His side. Wounds and bruises were the consequences of sin, what we deserved and what we brought upon ourselves.”429 In ourselves, apart from Jesus, we have sin, guilt, suffering and death. But in Christ alone we find life, peace and salvation because He endured the sufferings that we deserved in our place. “He alone brought medicine to us, and even procures [spiritual] health by his weakness, and life by his death; for he alone hath pacified the Father, he alone hath reconciled us to him.”430

The Bible often focuses our attention on the blood of Christ to emphasize that His expiatory suffering culminated in death and that His death was not a normal death, but a bloody sacrificial death. Thus, we are told that “the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7); that our sins are washed and we are freed by His blood (Rev. 1:5; 7:14). Paul says, “Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith” (Rom. 3:24-25). Our Lord’s bloody, painful, sacrificial death turned aside God’s wrath toward us. The wrath we deserved was placed on Him when He suffered. His scourging was at the hands of men, but ultimately

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429 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 4:305.
Jesus was scourged by God Himself (see Jn. 19:11). Hebrews 9:12 says, “Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” Jesus has “made peace through the blood of the cross” (Col. 1:20). Peter speaks of Christians having their sins cleansed and forgiven by saying the blood of Christ was sprinkled upon them (1 Pet. 1:2); they were redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:19).

In Ephesians Paul says, “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (1:7). The apostle is teaching that we were in bondage as a result of sin. Having broken God’s law we were slaves to sin and under the curse of the law. But Jesus, by shedding His own blood, paid the ransom price to set us free. He secured our emancipation from the guilt, penalty and power of sin. How did our Lord achieve this redemption? “Through His blood” “Why did he not say ‘by his death’? Many people object to this: they say they cannot abide this ‘theology of blood.’ If it were ‘by his death’ they would not object so much. They feel that the words of the Apostle are too materialistic and that they savour of the blood sacrifices of primitive people. Hence we must emphasize again the fact that the Apostle in his use of terms is always deliberate. I suggest that he deliberately emphasizes the blood because what happened in the death of our Lord can only be understood adequately in terms of the Old Testament sacrificial language.”

The Bible places great importance upon the blood of Christ for a number of reasons. First, the Scriptures equate blood and life. “And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul” (Lev. 17:10-11). Jehovah gives two reasons why blood is not to be consumed by man. First, blood is the essence of life. Thus, to avoid eating flesh with blood shows a respect for God-created life. Second, blood is used to atone for the guilt of sin. “The nature of Old Testament sacrifice was such that whenever cleansing from sin was required there had to be a blood ritual, since the relationship with God could not be renewed without it.”

Thus, the Bible emphasizes Christ’s shed blood; for it represents His giving of His own life in the place of the believing sinner. Believers receive expiation only in the shed blood of Christ; they are “justified by His blood” (Rom. 5:9).

Second, the blood of Christ points to the sacrificial character of His death. Jesus did not die in an accident, nor did He die as an example or martyr. He suffered unto death as a blood sacrifice. Christ’s life blood was poured out unto death in order to expiate sin and give life to His people. The importance of Christ’s sacrificial death is set forth repeatedly throughout history in the institution of the Lord’s supper. Exhibiting the cup of red wine to the apostles, Jesus said, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Mt. 26:28). The Lord’s supper has the bread which represents our Lord’s body and the wine which represents His shed blood. The body and the blood are separate, for the blood has been separated

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431 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, God’s Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1978] 1979), 155. Gordon Clark writes, “Note particularly the mention of Christ’s blood. Some modern versions, of which the iniquitous Good News for Modern Man is an example, mistranslate aima (blood) as death. Aima is blood, not death. The theological effect of this incorrect translation is to obscure the truth that Jesus’ death fulfills the anticipatory sacrifices of lambs, sacrifices whose purpose is to cleanse from sin. As Hebrews says, “without shedding of blood is no remission” (9:22). Good News could not squirm out of the Hebrews passage, for blood occurs in five successive verses; but here Christ’s relation to the Mosaic sacrifices is obscured” (Ephesians [Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1985], 16).

from the body by sacrifice. “That is what the wine in the cup means: it means the death of Jesus in our stead. It means the blood poured out from the heart of the incarnate God, that we might have fellowship with God, the sin which divided us being expiated by his death.”

The Crown of Thorns

The soldiers’ blood lust was not satisfied with the scourging of our Lord. When they were done tearing His sacred flesh they (like Herod’s guards before them) decided to mock the kingship of the Savior. John says, “And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on his head; and they put on Him a purple robe. Then they said, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ And they struck Him with their hands” (19:3).

The soldiers somewhere near the Praetorium collected some thorny twigs and crudely wove them together in a circle for a mock crown. Palestine has so many species of thorny plants that the kind of plant the soldiers used can never be established with any certainty. After the crown was fashioned the soldiers pressed it upon the Savior’s head, forcing many of the thorns deep into His flesh. This would have caused little streams of blood to run down Christ’s face, neck and body. The crown of thorns was a clever satanic mixture of mockery and torture. In God’s providence the crown of thorns was appropriate for the sin-bearer, the second Adam, for a number of reasons.

a) Thorns are a symbol of the curse. God told Adam after he fell into sin, “Cursed is the ground for your sake… Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you” (Gen. 3:17, 18). Because of sin Adam and all mankind were barred from Paradise. The cultivation of the ground was rendered painful and very difficult as a result of the fall. But the second Adam took the curse upon Himself and in His estate of humiliation He wore it as a crown. The Savior has taken the crown of the fall, curse and sin and placed it upon His own head for us. As Spurgeon so eloquently put it, “He has spoiled sin of its richest regalia, and he wears it himself. Glorious champion, all hail! What if I say that the thorns constituted a mural crown? Paradise was set round with a hedge of thorns so sharp that none could enter it, but our champion leaped first upon the bristling rampart, and bore the blood-red banner of his cross into the heart of that better new Eden, which thus he won for us never to be lost again. Jesus wears the mural chaplet which denotes that he has opened Paradise.”

b) The crown of thorns is a fitting symbol of humiliation and suffering unto victory. The curse that the first Adam brought was worldwide and comprehensive. The second Adam by His suffering unto the death of the cross definitively conquered the curse. The crown of gold had to be preceded by the crown of thorns. It is on the basis of our Lord’s redemptive suffering that He rules over all things in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:19ff.). It is on the basis of the Messiah’s redemptive suffering that even the curse of creation is conquered. “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now” (Rom. 8:20-23). The crown of thorns was necessary for the dominion mandate to be restored to its original God-glorifying purpose. Because Christ wore the crown of

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thorns and endured the full brunt of God’s curse against sin, the whole creation looks forward to the day of redemption when the curse is no more.

c) In the crown of thorns we see tangible proof that Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world. Only a redemptive King would allow Himself to be crowned with a symbol of the curse and an instrument of severe pain. Other kings conquer with swords and spears, but this holy King conquers through His precious sinless blood. In Leviticus we read that the high priest would place both his hands on the head of the goat to symbolize the imputation of Israel’s sin to the spotless animal (Lev. 16:21). But here God places thorns upon His Son’s head, symbolizing the sin and curse of the whole redeemed race as well as the whole world under a curse. As far as sin and the curse are found our Lord has conquered. “Here, as in every step of Christ’s passion, we see His complete and perfect substitution for sinners. He, the innocent sin-bearer, wore the crown of thorns, that we, the guilty, might wear a crown of glory. Vast is the contrast which there will be between the crown of glory that Christ will wear at His second advent, and the crown of thorns which He wore at His first coming.”

When we contemplate what our Lord did to remove our guilt and curse, we can begin to understand why we shall cast our crowns of glory at His pierced feet and cry out: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing” (Rev. 5:12)!

Christ Mocked by the Soldiers

The soldiers did not stop their ridicule with the crown of thorns. They proceeded to array Jesus with a purple garment. Purple represented the royal color signifying the dress of a king. If the soldiers did not reuse the cloth that came from Herod’s soldiers, they would likely have used either an old worn rug or a soldier’s faded mantle. “Once more we should call to mind the symbolical nature of this transaction also. Our Lord was clothed with a robe of shame and contempt, that we might be clothed with a spotless garment of righteousness, and stand in white robes before the throne of God.”

Mark and Matthew add the detail of placing a stick in the Savior’s hand which represented the royal diadem. “When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before and mocked Him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head” (Mt. 27:29-30). The phrase, “Hail, King of the Jews,” was done in mock imitation of the words that were addressed to the Roman emperor, “Hail Caesar!” Since the Roman soldiers were not knowledgeable of the Scriptures or theology it is likely that in mocking Jesus they were making fun of the Jews and their hopes. “It was the kingdom of the Jews itself that the soldiers laughed at. They regarded Jesus as the representative of the Messianic hope of the Jews. They would turn to ridicule these royal hopes, which were known far in the heathen world, more especially as

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436 Leon Morris’ comments on the color of the robe are very helpful: “John’s word is porpharoun (cf. Mark 15:17, porphuran). Matthew speaks of a chlamuda kokkinen (Matt. 27:28). In strictness scarlet was the color formed from the dried bodies of a scale insect that lived on the oak, while purple, a very costly color, came from the shell fish murex. But the ancients do not seem to have distinguished very sharply between colors, at least in their nomenclature. Purple was the color for royalty, but the soldiers would not have had access to a genuine purple cloak. A scarlet cloak, however, would be easy to obtain, and it would give the general idea well enough” (*The Gospel According to John*, 791, footnote 4).
they aspired…to the dominion of the whole earth.”438 “Here then is the Gospel of our salvation: the Savior was scourged, that we might go free, He was crowned with thorns, that we might be crowned with blessing and glory; He was clothed with a robe of contempt, that we might receive the robe of righteousness; He was rejected as king, that we might be made kings and priests unto God.”439 Everything that we deserved as fallen creatures, as accursed sinners was placed upon Jesus. “See here the wonderful condescension of our Lord Jesus in his sufferings for us. Great and generous minds can bear anything better than ignominy, any toil, any pain, any loss, rather than reproach; yet this the great and holy Jesus submitted to for us.”440

Pilate’s Last Appeal

After our Lord is severely beaten, mocked and dressed in “wretched clothes that make him look more like a clown than a king,”441 Pilate brings Christ out of the Praetorium and presents Him to the Jews.442 “Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, ‘Behold the Man!’” (Jn. 19:5). Pilate’s purpose in this presentation was to show the Jews that Jesus was a harmless, pitiful creature. In this state of supreme humiliation He obviously was not a threat to the Romans or the Jews. The governor hoped this shocking, pathetic sight of the Savior covered in blood, in severe pain, with a beaten and distorted face, with the ridiculous mock robe and crown of thorns would cause the Jews to have mercy and drop the charges.

In this presentation of Christ we see the very essence of the gospel: that victory could only come after the abyss of humiliation and suffering. On the one hand we have Pilate saying, “Here is the Man! Look at this pitiful wretched creature!” On the other hand the Jewish people are screaming for His death by crucifixion. Yet, this man of sorrows, beaten beyond recognition, covered in blood and stripes was the king of truth who came down from heaven. Preceded by Pilate’s second statement of the innocence of Christ, the Messiah King of Scripture is boldly and emphatically set before the Jews. “‘Behold the man:’ look once more on this man, this man who is a man no more, Isa. liii.3, a worm and no man, Ps.xxii.7, in His deepest misery lustrous with innocence and righteousness, silent and patient in His sufferings, like a lamb led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is dumb before her shearsers.”443 Pilate’s indecisiveness led to the increase of our Lord’s humiliation and the great aggravation of the Jews’ guilt. “Truly, ‘though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor.’ (2 Cor. viii.9.) Since the world began, the sun never shone on a more surprising spectacle both for angels and men.”444

As in the preceding attempts to set Jesus free, Pilate is totally disappointed by the Jews’ response. The Jews were not softened in their hatred of Christ by the pitiful sight of the torn, bleeding, humiliated Savior. “Like beasts of prey they have tasted blood, they thirsted for more. The humiliating figure of their Messiah crowned with thorns by these heathen, instead of

440 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1189.
441 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 337.
442 “That ‘Ecco Homo’ [‘behold the Man’] of his sounds over the world and draws the eyes of all generations to that marred visage. And lo, as we look, the shame is gone; it has lifted off Him and fallen on Pilate himself, on the soldiery, the priests, and the mob. His outflashing glory has scorched away every speck of disgrace, and tipped the crown of thorns with a hundred points of flaming brightness” (James Stalker, Life of Christ, 138).
humble, only infuriated them." They cried out, “crucify, crucify!” What a tragic sight—the chosen people, even in the face of the bloodied, tortured Savior demand the death of their own Messiah by crucifixion. The visible church had become a synagogue of Satan. In the name of their corrupt religion, they repeatedly demanded the judicial torture and murder of the Prince of Life.

Pilate is surprised and angered by this response and for the third time emphatically declares the innocence of Jesus. “You take and crucify Him for I find no fault in Him” (Jn. 19:6). John, like Luke (see 23:4, 14, 22), “is careful to record that Pilate three times affirmed his conviction of Jesus’ innocence.” This is the third time that Pilate’s plan to avoid being responsible for the death of Christ has completely failed. The sending of our Lord to Herod; the choice of Barabbas or Jesus; and now the presentation of the scourged and humiliated Savior all failed because the Jews were utterly determined that the Nazarene die an accursed death. The governor is so frustrated that he tells the Jews to go out and crucify Him themselves—an act contrary to Roman law. “Pilate was disgusted at their lawless clamor, indignant at their challenging his decision, angry at their insistence. ‘Take ye him’, if you want; ‘and crucify’ if you dare.”

At this point the Jews accuse Jesus of blasphemy (Jn. 19:7), which leads to Pilate’s second interrogation of the Savior (Jn. 19:9-11).

The main tactic of the Jews which stopped Pilate’s attempt to set Christ free is found in John 19:12-15: “From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, ‘If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar’s friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.’ When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, ‘Behold your King!’ But 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!’”

The Jews in their wicked cunning finally bring out their trump card. This is the argument that brings Pilate to his knees. The argument is basically as follows: “Jesus had made Himself a king. Anyone who declares himself a king is an enemy of Caesar. Therefore if you let Christ go, then you are not a friend of Caesar. You are not loyal to Caesar. You are in fact an enemy of Caesar.” This argument was an indirect threat to Pilate’s life. The Jewish leaders are making it known to the governor that if he lets the Nazarene go, then the Jews will send a number of complaints and charges unto Caesar. Not only would they bring up his past failures, which were serious; but they also would accuse Pilate of releasing a Jewish revolutionary against Rome who claimed to be king. “And that was something for Pilate to fear! For Tiberius was notoriously suspicious of any who threatened his position, and he dealt with them ruthlessly and savagely. Pilate knew that an accusation of aiding and abetting a revolutionary king in turbulent Palestine would be highly dangerous.”

This Jewish accusation reveals the length they were willing to go to place Jesus on the cross. These wicked liars had just convinced the people to let a truly dangerous revolutionary go in the place of our Lord who never countenanced acts of violence or revolution; who bid the Jews to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. These very men who passionately hated Caesar and

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Roman rule were accusing the highest Roman official in Judea of disloyalty to Rome. “What a frightful snarl of lies and hypocrisy!... The scene was a devil’s masterpiece in lying.” Pilate knew the Jews were despicable liars and hypocrites; and, he also knew that the Savior was no political or military threat to Rome whatsoever. But Pilate was unwilling to jeopardize his own life to secure the life of the Nazarene. He would rather send an innocent man to a horrible death than allow himself to be scrutinized by his superiors and possibly lose his own position, property and life. Pilate was a pragmatist and a coward who sent the sinless Son of God to the cross to save his own skin. In the final analysis, “Pilate had to choose between Christ and the world. When the issue was clearly defined, he did not hesitate; he decided to please the people and win their applause, rather than intensify their already fierce hatred against him and condemn him to Caesar.”

We must see the hand of God in all of this. Jesus the Messiah had to be condemned and had to die a sacrificial death on the cross. Yet Pilate, in God’s sovereign plan, conducted the trial of Christ in such a manner as to prove decisively and repeatedly that the Nazarene was completely innocent. The governor, yielding to impressions of the truth, publicly declared three times, “I find no fault in Him” (Jn. 18:38; 19:4, 6; cf. Lk. 23:4, 14); yet being the weak, sinful, cowardly man that he was, he sent the Savior to His death. Pilate was a fitting instrument in the hand of God. The sinlessness of Christ was exalted and the necessary propitiatory death was accomplished.

When Pilate heard this new Jewish argument regarding loyalty to Caesar, he gave up. He brought Jesus outside and placed Him in the public spot for the pronouncement of the sentence. John tells us that Pilate “sat down in the judgment seat called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha” (19:13). “The condemnation must be spoken under the open heaven, in the presence of the accused.” When John describes this announcement regarding the guilt and condemnation of Christ, it is clear that this event holds a universal significance for him. Note how he so carefully ties this momentous event to history. He not only designates the place by both its Greek and Hebrew (or Aramaic) names, but also specifies the day and the hour. The Jews gathered before Pilate did not know that their wicked actions would lead to the fulfillment of the Passover, a second, greater Exodus wherein the Savior’s sacrificial blood would set sinners free in all nations. The crucial hour of redemption, the most important event in human history, has arrived.

The Greek word for pavement (aithostroton) can refer to “a stone pavement” or an area inlaid with stone such as marble. It can also refer to “a mosaic pavement.” The word Gabbatha is not related to the term pavement and simply signifies a hill of some kind. Apparently what the Romans called the “Pavement” the Jews called Gabbatha. “W. F. Albright thinks that L. H. Vincent has demonstrated that the place referred to is the courtyard of the Tower of Antonia, where there was a Roman pavement covering at least 2,500 square meters. As it stood on a rocky height the name gabbeta, ‘ridge’, was applicable (BNT pp. 158f).” This place is the traditional site of these amazing events.

Regarding John’s time indicators, we need to note in contradistinction from modernists that there is no contradiction between John’s account and the synoptic gospels. When John says “Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover” (19:14), he is not designating the period...
immediately prior to the Passover week. “Elsewhere (Mk. 15:42, Lk. 23:54, Mt. 27:62, and Jn. 19:31) paraskeua means the day of preparation for the Sabbath, as here.”453 “The first statement should cause no trouble whatever. Luke 23:53 writes, ‘it was the day of preparation, and the Sabbath drew on’; compare Matt. 27:62. Mark 15:42 has, ‘the preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath,’… And John himself repeats paraskeua, ‘the preparation,’ in v. 31 and 42. All this means that the day of the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus is Friday.”454

What about the time given by John (“about the sixth hour,” 19:14)? Doesn’t Mark say, “Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him” (15:25)? As we consider this alleged “problem,” we must keep in mind that both John and Mark wrote under divine inspiration. Therefore, their records are infallible and cannot truly contradict one another. Among commentators there are at least six different solutions offered regarding this problem. We will only consider the two best solutions offered. The first argues that John is using the Roman method of keeping time, while Mark the Jewish manner. Thus, for John the sixth hour would be around 6:00 am while Mark’s third hour would be around 9:00 am. The problem with this view is that 6:00 am would be too early for the conclusion of Pilate’s trial. Also, John uses the Jewish method of reckoning time when he discusses the Samaritan woman. Further, “there appears to be no evidence that the so-called Roman method of computing time was used other than in legal matters like leases. At Rome, as elsewhere, the day was reckoned to begin at sunrise.”455

The best solution is that the Jewish method of reckoning time was not nearly as precise as ours and thus John and Mark are giving approximations not exact time references. Ryle writes, “John’s sixth hour means any time after nine o’clock in the morning; any time, in fact, within the space begun by the Jewish third hour. They say that the Jews divided the twelve hours of the day into four great portions: from six to nine, from nine to twelve, from twelve to three, and from three to six. They also say that any part of the time after our six in the morning would be called the third hour, and any time after our nine in the morning would be called the sixth hour. And they conclude that both the condemnation and the crucifixion took place soon after nine o’clock,—Mark calling it the third hour, because it was near our nine o’clock; John calling it the sixth hour, because it was some time between our nine and twelve.”456 This position is strengthened by the fact that John does not say, “it was the sixth hour,” but that “it was about the sixth hour.” Therefore, Mark’s “third hour” refers to a time after 9:00 am perhaps in the middle of the morning, while John’s the sixth hour indicates that perhaps the mid-morning had passed and it was closer to noon than 9:00 am. We can only be certain that Jesus was crucified between 9:00 am and noon. It had to be quite some time before noon because from twelve to three o’clock a miraculous pitch darkness covered the land (Mk. 15:33; Mt. 27:45; Lk. 23:44). Obviously the darkness did not begin until our Lord had been on the cross for some time.

Chapter 12: The Civil Trial of Christ—Jesus Condemned to Death

Pilate saith unto them, “What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?” They all say unto him, “Let him be crucified.” And the governor said, “Why, what evil hath he done?” But they cried out the more, saying, “Let him be crucified.” When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, “I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it.” Then answered all the people, and said, “His blood be on us, and on our children.” Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. (Mt. 27:22:26)

And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, “Behold your King!” But they cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him.” Pilate saith unto them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led him away. (Jn. 19:14-16)

As we turn our attention to the conviction of Christ we will examine: (1) Pilate’s final actions; and, (2) The Jews’ expression of their hatred toward Jesus.

(1) During this most amazing trial in history Pilate has come to the conclusion that all of his appeals have had absolutely no effect upon the Jews and that his only option is to condemn a completely innocent man to death. Consequently, as the trial draws to a close, we see Pilate do three things: first, he angrily makes one last appeal; second, he attempts to make himself innocent in the matter of the Savior’s death; and, third he gives the Jews what they wanted by passing sentence against Jesus.

The governor’s frustration is seen in his statement to the Jews, “Behold your king!” Pilate knew that the Jews emphatically rejected the kingship of Christ, so this statement is spoken with scorn and sarcasm. Pilate is angry at the Jews and thus purposely inflames their rage. The Jews respond like wild dogs that have injured a young deer: “Away with Him, away with Him!” In other words, “Take Him away and crucify Him.” As Matthew puts it, “Let Him be crucified” (27:22, 23). To this response Pilate makes his last appeal, “Shall I crucify your King?” (Jn. 19:15). Matthew adds, “What evil has He done?” (Mt. 27:23). Pilate knows that he cannot change the mind of this mob. Therefore, he makes this final appeal in order to focus responsibility for the Savior’s death on the Jews.

Matthew’s account tells us that Pilate then resorts to some symbolism to placate his own guilt and place the blame squarely upon the Jews. “When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude saying, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it’” (Mt. 27:24). The washing of the hands with water as a public sign of innocence was found among Greeks and had precedence in the Old Testament. For example, when the elders of a city found a man who

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457 Leon Morris writes, “Pilate…did not deliver sentence as might have been expected, but said, ‘Behold your King!’ As in the case of ‘Behold, the man!’ (v. 5) John’s irony lurks behind the words. For Pilate there was no question of kingship. It was plain to him that Jesus was not a king in any sense in which he understood the term. He was simply using the terms of the accusation in a last ditch effort to get the Jews to drop proceedings. But for John the kingship was real. He wants us to see Jesus as King in the very act in which He went to death for the salvation of men” (The Gospel According to John, 802).

458 “Washing hands was a typically Jewish (but also sometimes Gentile) way of declaring one’s innocence (Deut. 21:6; Letter of Aristeas 306)” (Craig S. Keener, The Bible Background Commentary, 126).
was slain and did not know who killed him, “all the elders of that city nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley. Then, they shall answer and say, ‘Our hands have not shed this blood, nor have our eyes seen it’” (Deut. 21:6-7; cf. Ps. 26:6; 73:13). The crowd understood exactly what the governor was doing, for he accompanied the sign with the words: “I am innocent of the blood of this righteous Man.” “The judge was saying, as it were, ‘Since I do not at all believe that Jesus is guilty of any crime, I refuse to assume any responsibility for his death by crucifixion. I am free from the guilt of shedding his blood.”

Pilate declared that Christ was an innocent, righteous Man. Yet he was willing to use his authority as a magistrate to send the Savior to His death. The governor was engaged in a great self-deception when he believed that a water ritual and his statement that he was not responsible shifted all his accountability to the Jews. Pilate admitted publicly that in essence the execution of Jesus was nothing short of cold-blooded murder. Therefore, the only moral thing for Pilate to do would have been to release the Savior. Pilate, however, was convinced that he could remove his own responsibility by words and public gestures without the accompanying right deeds. He was sorely mistaken. Pilate’s self-deception should be a warning to every believer of the sinful heart’s amazingly deceitful ability to justify or excuse sinful behavior.

Pilate’s final act in the trial was to pronounce sentence regarding Jesus. What is particularly interesting regarding this point is that none of the gospels give us an explicit pronouncement of sentence against our Lord. The closest statement we have is found in Luke 23:24-25: “So Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they requested. And he released to them the one they requested...but he delivered Jesus to their will.” “In 2 Macc. 4:47 and 3 Macc. 4:2 the term ‘gave sentence’ (epekrinen) is a technical term for giving a judicial sentence.” Note that Pilate does not pronounce that Christ is guilty; but instead he declares that the sentence should be as the Jews requested. This point is emphasized by the statement that “he delivered Jesus to their will.” “This pronouncement, made by a judge who again and again had declared that Jesus was innocent, was the most shocking travesty of justice history has ever recorded.”

“Luke begins and ends by referring to the Jews, first to their demand that Pilate granted and finally to their will to which he gave Jesus up. We cannot miss the emphasis on the Jews’ responsibility for Jesus’ death.” “He delivered Him to the mob (John xix.16), and thus to the will of the mob (Luke xxiii.25), making use, however, of the soldiers to see the execution legally consummated.”

Pilate, the centurion and his quaternion of soldiers (although guilty for their own actions) were merely carrying out the decision of the chief priests and the Jewish mob. We must remember that behind all of this wicked madness lies God’s sovereign will. Christ “was delivered up because of our offenses” (Rom. 4:25). God “did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all” (Rom. 8:32). Our Lord was delivered over to suffering and death, so that we would forever be delivered from the sufferings of hell and eternal death. What an amazing and glorious salvation!

(2) As we turn our attention to the Jews’ response to Pilate’s final arguments in our Lord’s trial, there are two statements to consider.

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First, in response to Pilate’s question, “Shall I crucify your king,” the chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar!” (Jn. 19:15). John, writing under divine inspiration, wants us to know that this statement was not simply from some thugs in the crowd, but came directly from the leadership of the Jewish nation. The leaders of the Jewish people became so wrapped up in their hatred and denunciation of Christ that they renounced their allegiance to God and their hope in the coming deliverance of the Messiah. When they rejected God incarnate for a wicked pagan emperor, they unwittingly revealed their complete apostasy and denunciation of Jehovah.

The chief priests had made this statement to Pilate to emphasize that they were completely loyal to Caesar in order to scare Pilate, whom they were accusing of being disloyal. These men, in reality, hated Caesar and could not care less if the emperor was loyally served or brutally murdered. Yet, in God’s providence, their words had a deeper significance than they themselves intended. According to the Old Testament the ideal for faithful Jews was that God Himself would be their king (see Judg. 8:23; 1 Sam. 8:7). Jesus the Messiah, the God-man, was the Man whom God intended to rule the whole world and have victory over all of His enemies. “When they despised Christ their true King, and delivered Him up to death, they ceased, in fact, to be God’s people and kingdom, and sank entirely under the power of this world, which God used for the execution of His wrath: comp. Lukexix.27”

The implications of this statement are to be weighed. In the context of the trial of Jesus, of the Man who proclaimed to the nation the kingdom of God, and manifested it in his deeds, and called on Israel to repent and believe, it is nothing less than the abandonment of the messianic hope of Israel. For it is not Jesus alone whom they reject; any claimant to the messianic office is excluded on the basis of the slogan, ‘No king but Caesar.’ Their repudiation of Jesus in the name of a pretended loyalty to the emperor entailed their repudiation of the promise of the kingdom of God, with which the gift of the Messiah is inseparably bound in Jewish faith, and Israel’s vocation to be its heir, its instrument, and its proclaimer to the nations.

They confessed with their mouths Caesar instead of Christ and they received their apostate confession. Their confession was like an unconscious prophecy. “Justly therefore they were delivered into Caesar’s hands, and endured the heaviest calamities.”

Second, after Pilate washed his hands and proclaimed his innocence regarding the blood of Christ, “all the people answered and said, ‘His blood be on us and on our children’” (Mt. 27:25). The Jewish crowd was so obsessed with obtaining the sentence of crucifixion from Pilate that they were immediately willing to absolve the governor of all responsibility and take that responsibility upon themselves and their own children. This statement reveals their complete blindness to the truth, in that they would only make such a careless statement if they were fully convinced that their cause was righteous before God. They, in essence, were saying to Pilate, “Do not concern yourself with the death of this man. If there is to be any blame for the shedding of His blood, we are happy to absolve you of any guilt in this matter and we are even willing to take the whole blame ourselves. Therefore, your conscience should now be totally free. Go ahead

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465 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 343.
466 Cyril as quoted in J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:323.
467 J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:323.
and condemn Him. On us and our children, not on you or on yours shall be all the responsibility and liability of judgment.” Woe unto that generation of unbelieving Jews who rejected the suffering servant, for it cost them their lives and souls. Spurgeon writes,

He that stumbleth upon this stone shall be broken, but upon whomsoever this stone shall fall it shall grind him to powder. See what came to these Jewish people: they were themselves crucified by Titus in such numbers that they could no longer find wood enough for their execution. Jerusalem destroyed is the result of Jesus crucified. Beware, ye that fight against him, for the omnipotent Father will take up his quarrel, and all the forces of creation and of providence will be at his command to wage war for truth and righteousness. The Nazarene has triumphed, and he will triumph even to the end, when he shall have all his enemies under his feet. O ye that hate him, be wise betimes, and close the hopeless contest in which you chiefly fight your own souls.468

Regarding the Jews’ statement we should note the following.

a) Matthew writing under divine inspiration seems to be condemning the unbelieving nation as a whole. “Throughout the passion narrative Matthew has used the term ochlos to refer to the crowd. But in Matt. 27:25 he switches to pas ho laos (‘all the people’). Elsewhere in his Gospel, Matthew uses laos to refer to the Jewish people taken as a collectivity. Matthew meant more than the small group of Jews who gathered around Pilate’s judgment seat at Passover time in A.D. 30.”469 The unbelieving nation as a whole was placed under a horrible curse as a result of their rejection of the Messiah.

b) Like their leaders’ statement regarding Caesar, the Jews are, without realizing it, indeed pronouncing a curse upon themselves and their families. In light of the destruction of Israel, Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 67-70, their statement is almost prophetic.

c) The idea of blood or the guilt of shed blood resting upon someone or “upon their head” is a biblical concept. In 2 Samuel 1:16 David kills an Amalekite for slaying Saul saying, “Your blood is on your own head, for your own mouth has testified against you.” Jeremiah told the wicked princes and people that if they killed him, “you will surely bring innocent blood on yourselves, on this city, and on its inhabitants” (26:15). As a result of the preaching of the gospel, which included the truth about who was responsible for our Lord’s death, the Jewish council said to Peter and the other apostles, “And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” (Ac. 5:28).

d) This passage and its literal fulfillment does not contradict the Old Testament teaching that children must not be punished for the sins of their fathers (e.g., Ezek. 18:2-3 and Jer. 31:29-30, “In those days they shall say no more: ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ But every one shall die for his own iniquity…”). The children were included in the curse because they (with the exception of those who converted to Christ) also hated Jesus and persecuted His church. To hate, persecute and murder believers is treated in Scripture as persecuting the Lord Himself (e.g., “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Ac. 8:4).

The Jews received a special curse because they rejected Christ in spite of: the amazing signs He did in their presence; His personal teaching; the perfect fulfillment of prophecy; their standing as the covenant people, and their very active role in His condemnation and crucifixion. Nevertheless, this curse should stand as a warning to all the enemies and opponents of the

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Mediator. There are many avowed enemies of the resurrected king in our day (e.g., modernists, so-called scientists, secular humanists, Islamic Fascists, etc.) who delight in insulting Jesus Christ, His people and His infallible Word. In fact, in our anti-Christian Western culture unbelievers, deniers, mockers and blasphemers are put on a pedestal by the people and the civil magistrate. “These are the true followers of the men whose mouths were full of ‘Crucify Him! Crucify Him!’ They cannot endure that Jesus should be remembered, much less revered. They claim to be ‘liberal,’ and to be large-hearted towards all religions; but their unmitigated scorn of the faith of Jesus is displayed on every possible occasion, proving that the spirit of persecution burns within them.’”

They hate the Lord because they want to maintain their human autonomy. They do not want their sins exposed. They do not want to repent and acknowledge their guilt. They hate the truth and most of all they hate the Truth incarnate. With every fiber of their being they cry out, “Away with Him. Put Him to death.” But the Truth incarnate has already conquered death; He is resurrected and sits at the right hand of Power. Take comfort, dear Christian, for He is coming again. He will come “in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Th. 1:8-9). If you do not embrace the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, then you will end up in the ethical garbage dump of history.

The trial of the Savior has come to an end. The greatest travesty of justice in history has occurred. The most pure, holy, innocent Man in human history—the sinless Lamb of God—has been rejected, tortured, mocked and convicted. As we tearfully contemplate these painful events, we must do so with the knowledge that in God’s wonderful plan of redemption these horrible events had to occur. There was no other way for God to be just while justifying sinners (Rom. 3:26). The just had to suffer and die for the unjust. When we begin to understand this amazing salvation, our tears are mingled with joy; for victory has come by the sinless blood of the divine-human Mediator. “He shall see the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities” (Isa. 53:11).

Chapter 13: The Way to Calvary

Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led him away. And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha. (John 19:16-17)

And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple from him, and put his own clothes on him, and led him out to crucify him. And they compel one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his cross. And they bring him unto the place Golgotha, which is, being interpreted, the place of a skull. And they gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh: but he received it not. (Mk. 15:20-23; cf. Mt. 27:31-34)

And as they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus. And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning unto them said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. For, behold, the days are coming, in which they shall say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.’ Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us;’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?” And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. (Lk. 23:26-32)

After our Lord was condemned he was delivered over to the execution squad to be crucified. As we examine the walk to Calvary there are three areas that merit our attention. We will consider: (1) the historical details of the procession to the cross; (2) the humiliation and curse of these events; and, (3) Jesus’ warning to the women of Jerusalem.

(1) Regarding the historical details there are a number of areas to consider. First, although we are not given all the details of the procession, it is likely that standard Roman procedure was followed. According to this procedure the procession would have been led by a centurion. Usually the centurion would carry a board specifying the nature of the crime involved. Or, the victim would have a placard around his neck describing the offense. In the case of Christ, Pilate purposely angered the Jews by writing “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (Jn. 19:19). Since the governor firmly believed that the Savior was a righteous Man, innocent of any charges, he simply states the kingship of Christ as a fact. Likely he did this as a type of revenge against the Jewish leaders who, he believed, forced his hand in the execution of the Nazarene.

During the procession each prisoner would be surrounded by four Roman soldiers. The soldiers were likely the same men who had earlier mocked our Lord in the Praetorium. The soldiers would prevent the escape of the prisoner and would prevent anyone in the crowd from attempting to secure the release of a prisoner by violence. The four soldiers were the execution squad for that particular prisoner. They would fasten the prisoner to the cross and later break the legs of the victim if necessary to hasten death. We are told in Mark’s account that the soldiers took off the purple robe and put Jesus’ clothes back on Him before they led Him away (Mk. 15:20). “It was normal for people to be crucified naked. Jesus’ garments will be removed at the cross (v. 24), but the return of his clothes for the march to Golgotha may have been a concession to Jewish sensibilities, which found public nakedness offensive (see M. Sanh. 6:3; Jub. 3:30-31).” Although Mark says that the purple cloak was removed, he says nothing about the crown of thorns. It is very likely that the crown of thorns was not removed. During this procession our Lord was followed by the two “malefactors” who were to be crucified with him.

The normal Roman practice for procession to the site of execution at that time was to take the longest, most crowded road in order to attract the most public attention. Whether this was followed in the case of the Savior we have no way of knowing. “The way along which the Lord passed from the hall of judgment to the place of crucifixion is traditionally known as the Via Dolorosa.” Although according to tradition this route ran from the Praetorium at the Antonia Castle to a place near the present church of the Holy Sepulchre, no one knows the exact path. Scholars are not agreed as to whether Jesus was convicted at Antonia or Herod’s old residence. Further, there are arguments for at least three separate sites outside of Jerusalem. “The precise position of this place is not known certainly and can only be conjectured. We only know (from

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verse twenty [Jn. 19:20]) that it was ‘nigh to the city,’ that it was ‘outside’ the walls of Jerusalem at the time of our Lord’s crucifixion, and that it was near some public road, as there is mention in the Gospel of them ‘that passed by’ (Matt. xxvii.39). So many changes have taken place, during the long period of 1800 years, in the boundary walls and the soil of Jerusalem, that no wise man will speak positively as to the exact whereabouts of Golgotha at this day.”

Second, the place where the crucifixion took place is called the place of a skull, Golgotha (Mk. 15:22; Mt. 27:33; Jn. 19:17), or Calvary (Lk. 23:33). The name Golgotha comes from the Aramaic gulgulta (Hebrew gulgolet) which means “skull.” Thus, the site of crucifixion is called the place of the skull. Luke uses the word “Calvary” from the Latin calvaria which also means “skull” or “cranium.” The Greek kranion topos could be translated “skull” or “cranium place.” There are two common arguments set forth by scholars as to the reason for this name. One position is that the site of execution had skulls and bones lying around from victims of execution. This view is untenable because the Jews would not come near bones and skulls for fear of being rendered unclean. A much more likely reason is that the place of execution resembled the cranium, the top of a skull or a round, bare hillock. The site does not need to resemble the whole skull with eye sockets but only the cranium to be in line with the word Golgotha or Calvary. The idea that our Lord was crucified on a mount or cliff resembling the face of a skull is without Scriptural foundation. It probably was a small somewhat circular elevation of limestone. Ironically, the place of the skull is the location where the Son of God crushes the head of the serpent and conquers the kingdom of death.

Third, we are told in John’s gospel that Jesus went forth bearing His cross (19:17). The Romans required the condemned to carry their own instrument of death. Because the Savior was so weak from the scourging, He was only required to carry the cross as long as he was capable of doing so. Apparently, after a short period of time, Christ collapsed onto the ground or perhaps He was moving too slowly for the soldiers. In any case, the soldiers believed it was necessary to impress into service one Simon, a Cyrenian, to carry the cross (Mt. 27:32; Mk. 15:21; Lk. 23:26). Mark tells us that Simon happened to be passing by when he was ordered to help. Simon may have been a Passover visitor or perhaps was a part of the community of Cyrenian Jews that lived in or near Jerusalem (see Ac. 2:10; 6:9). Cyrene was located in what is now northern Libya, only ten miles from the Mediterranean Sea.

What is particularly interesting regarding Simon is that Mark identifies his sons as “Alexander and Rufus.” The only reason Mark would identify Simon’s sons is that they must have been known to the church at Rome. “It is most likely that Mark’s gospel was first written for the church at Rome.” In Romans 16:13 we read, “Greet Rufus chosen in the Lord, and his

473 J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:333. Merrill C. Tenney writes, “Two places have been claimed as the site of the Crucifixion. One is at the present site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which was built in honor of Helen, the mother of Constantine, in the fourth century, after an attempt to identify the original site. The devastation of the city after the first and second revolts destroyed all landmarks or buried them so deeply under rubble that they cannot now be identified. The second place is Gordon’s Calvary, located outside the present wall, north of the Damascus Gate on the Nablus Road. It is now a Muslim cemetery on the brow of a ridge that encircles the northern wall. While the rocky eminence and the adjacent garden containing an ancient tomb seem to fit the description of the Gospels, it is doubtful whether either would have been used before A.D. 70. Until the location of the “Second Wall” that bounded the northwest side of the city in Jesus’ time can be settled, the exact location of Calvary will be debatable. The data of the Gospels are not specific; all that can be known is that the Crucifixion took place outside the city walls, not far from one of the main roads” (The Gospel of John, 182, footnote 17).

474 “The verb angarevein has the semi-technical meaning ‘to press into service’ (cf. 5:41), which the Roman soldiers could require of any person they encountered” (Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 834).

mother and mine.” Although we will never know with certainty, it may be that Simon was converted that day at Golgotha and his whole family became disciples of Christ.

The statement in John that Jesus bore His cross and the synoptic gospels that Simon was compelled to bear His cross, raises two questions: What was the form of the cross? And, did Christ carry the whole cross or only the lighter transom or cross beam? There is a lot of discussion regarding the shape of the cross because the Romans did not always use the same form. Sometimes it was in the shape of an X called the crux decussate or St. Andrew’s cross. At other times the shape of the capital T was used known as crux commissa, the Egyptian, St. Anthony’s, or the Greek cross. There also was the shape of the small t known as the crux immissa or the Latin cross. According to tradition Jesus was crucified on the Latin cross. This is also the position of the vast majority of interpreters. The argument in favor of this view is that this form of the cross is the only form that would have allowed the placard to rest above the Savior’s head which said, “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (Mk. 15:26; Mt. 27:37; Lk. 23:38; Jn. 19:19). This superscription was written in Greek, Hebrew and Latin (Jn. 19:20) and was in plain sight of the Jews (Jn. 19:20). J. C. Ryle notes that it was common for Romans to use trees for crucifixion and thus a tree cut with two forked arms may have been used. Such a cross would be shaped like the letter Y. He writes, “[I]t is worth remembering that it was very common to crucify on a tree such as I have described,…the Latin word for ‘cross-bearer,’ means literally, ‘forked tree-bearer,’”—and…our Bible translators have four times spoken of the ‘wood’ on which our Lord was crucified as ‘the tree’ (Acts v. 30; x. 39; xiii. 29; 1 Peter ii. 24). The matter therefore is not quite so clear as some may think…

Scholars are divided on whether Jesus carried the whole cross or just the cross piece. The Greek word for cross stauros “comes from the Gr. Verb histemi (root sta), ‘to stand,’ and originally meant an ‘upright pointed stake’ or ‘pale.’ Criminals were either tied to or impaled upon it. Stauros in the NT, however, apparently was a pole sunk into the ground with a cross-bar fastened to it giving it a ‘T’ shape. Often the word ‘cross’ referred only to the cross bar.”

An ancient tradition regarding Simon of Cyrene that was favored by certain Gnostic and docetic heretics was that Simon was crucified in place of Jesus. Beasley-Murray writes, “[W]e should like to know how early was the notion, expressed by the Gnostic Basilides in the commentary on John, that Simon of Cyrene died on the cross instead of Jesus (cf. the Nag Hammadi evidence, The Second Treatise of the Great Seth, VII, 56, in The Nag Hammadi Library in English, ed. J. M. Robinson [New York: Harper & Row, 1977] 332). The motive for such an idea is obvious, and the legend spread far and wide (eventually it became part of Mohammedan dogma, as it is to this day)" (John, 345. See R. T. France, Mark, 641, footnote 5).

Many commentators see Isaac carrying the wood of the burnt offering as a type of Christ who had to carry the cross to His sacrifice (see Gen. 22:6).

Regarding the history of crucifixion Hawthorn writes, “Death by crucifixion originated somewhere in the E. Alexander the Great seems to have learned of it from the Persians. Rome borrowed the idea from the Phoenicians through Carthage, and perfected it as a means of capital punishment. The Romans reserved crucifixion, however, for slaves, robbers, assassins, and the like or for rebellious provincials. Only rarely were Rom. Citizens subjected to this kind of treatment (Cicero, In Ver. 1. 5. 66). The tradition, therefore, which relates the beheading of Paul, and Peter’s crucifixion accords well with this distinction between peoples.

According to Josephus crucifixion in Pal. was a most common sight (Antiq. 17. 10. 10; 20. 5. 2; Wars, 2. 12. 6. 13. 2. 14. 9; 5. 11. 1). The fact that two robbers were crucified with Jesus in Jerusalem tends to confirm this claim.” (Ibid, 1:1038).
site. Given the fact that Golgotha—the site of execution—was apparently regularly used by the Romans, the cross beam scenario is a distinct possibility. There is no way to know with certainty whether either position is true. If the Savior had to carry the whole cross (upright post and cross beam) we must keep in mind that the crosses used by the Romans were much smaller than the giant crosses of Medieval and Renaissance art. Scholars believe that the victims of crucifixion were only suspended a few feet off the ground, not the five or six feet of many paintings.

(2) As we examine the events leading to crucifixion and the crucifixion itself it is important to note the humiliation, shame and curse that the suffering Servant endured to conquer sin and death for us. There are a number of areas to consider.

First, Jesus was compelled to carry the cross, the instrument of His own torture and death. The Jews regarded these instruments of a bloody, prolonged death as detestable. They regarded any person who even touched these instruments of death as defiled or morally polluted. The rough wood would be stained by the blood of countless murderers and criminals. Our Lord was paraded through the streets of Jerusalem bearing the gibbet of execution to increase His humiliation and shame. The very streets of the holy city where God placed His special presence were stained with the sinless blood of the Son of God. The fact that the Savior started His journey to Golgotha all alone “stresses the fact that the Suffering Servant was being led into complete isolation.”

Second, Christ was led outside the city to be crucified. The author of Hebrews tells us that our Lord’s suffering outside the city is significant. “For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach” (13:11-13). This passage alludes to Leviticus 16 and the day of atonement when propitiation was made for the children of Israel. After the clean animals were slain and their blood was used to make atonement, they were carried outside the camp. Then they were burned in the fire “their skins, their flesh and their offal” (16:27). God regarded the camp area as holy, but the area outside the camp was unholy and unclean. Therefore, outside the camp was the dumping ground for that which was defiled or unclean. There was to be no more contact or fellowship between Israelites in the camp and the sin-laden sacrificial animals. That which was unclean must not come in contact with or have fellowship with the clean. As Pink notes: “Outside the camp’ was the place where the leper was compelled to dwell (Lev. 13:46), it was the place where criminals were condemned and slain (Lev. 24:14 and cf. Josh. 7:24, 1 Kings 21:13, Acts 7:58), it was the place where the defiled were put (Num. 5:3), and it was the place where filth was deposited (Deut. 23:12-14).”

Christ, in order to be a sacrifice for sin, had to suffer outside the gate (i.e. the gate and walls of Jerusalem. The holy city where God’s special presence dwelt corresponded to the camp which contained the holy of holies). To become a curse for sin the Savior had to go to unholy

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482 Arthur W. Pink, An Exposition of Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 1186. “The high priest annually entered the Most Holy Place, sprinkled animal blood, and atoned for the sin of the people. Jesus became sin for us (II Cor. 5:21), bore the curse that rested upon us (Gal. 3:13), and according to the law was condemned to die outside the city gate (John 19:17-18). For instance, the son of the Israelite woman who blasphemed the name of the Lord had to be taken outside the camp, and the people were to stone him to death (Lev. 24:11-16, 23; also see Num. 15:35). Achan was taken outside the camp to the valley of Achor where the Israelites stoned him (Josh. 7:24-26; cf. Acts 7:38). Because of man’s sin, Jesus had to suffer outside the city gate where he endured God’s wrath. (Simon J. Kistemaker, Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews [Grand Rapid: Baker, 1984], 421).
ground, to a defiled place, to set apart His own people by His blood. By going outside the gate, Jesus identifies Himself with the curse, with the world in its unholiness. “[F]or Christ Jesus the moment in which He had to pass through the gate, His back to the temple, was the equivalent of a scourging from heaven.”

To be a sacrifice for sin God had to cast our Lord outside the city, outside the realm of holiness, into the realm of the curse. “This is a sin offering. Please step out of the neighborhood, for He is unclean. He has been made sin…. Christ is now being cast into fellowship with that which is unclean. That which is unclean and is thrown outside the camp…is thrown on the dung hill.”

In order to receive the curse of God for sin and descend into the suffering of hell, Jesus had to go outside the gate to Golgotha, to the place of death and destruction. The spotless Lamb of God was cast away from the presence and fellowship of the Father into the outer darkness and terror of hell. “While we are unable to draw near to God because of our sin, God draws near to us in the person of his Holy One who on our unholy ground makes his holiness available to us in exchange for our sin which he bears and for which he atones on the cross.”

John Owen identifies four major teachings that are connected to our Lord going outside the camp:

(1.) That he left the city and church-state of the Jews; whence he denounced their destruction as he went out of the gate, Luke xxiii. 28-30. (2.) He put an end unto all sacrificing in the city and temple, as unto divine acceptation. All was now finishing. (3.) He declared that his sacrifice and the benefits of it were not included in the church of the Jews, but were equally extended unto the whole world, I John 11. 2, John xi. 52. (4.) He declared that his death and suffering were not only a sacrifice, but a punishment for sin; namely, the sins of the people that were to be sanctified by his blood. For he went out of the city as a malefactor, and died the death which by divine institution was a sign of the curse, Gal. iii. 13.

Third, Jesus was crucified between two criminals. “Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left” (Mt. 27:38; cf. Mk. 15:27). As Isaiah prophesied, “He was numbered with transgressors” (53:12). Our Lord was placed in the middle of two nefarious criminals as if He “were ‘hand and glove’ with the vilest of the vile, and had been by far the worst of the three; as if He had been the chief of sinners.”

“The two malefactors deserved to die, as one of them admitted (Luke 23:40, 41); but a greater load of guilt rested upon Christ; for ‘He bore the sin of many,’ and therefore he was rightly distinguished as the King of sufferers, who could truly ask, ‘Was [there] ever grief like mine?’”

On the Roman cross of execution Jesus was given the supreme place of dishonor because He had to bear the sin of the whole world (i.e. the elect of every nation). Fourth, the method of the Savior’s execution (crucifixion) is regarded by Scripture as a curse. Despicable criminals who were executed under the Old Covenant administration were suspended from trees both to intensify their punishment and turn God’s “fierce anger” from Israel (Num. 25:4; cf. Josh. 10:26; 1 Sam. 31:10). The law says, “[H]e who is hanged is accursed by God” (Dt. 21:23). Craigie writes,

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483 Klaas Schilder, Christ Crucified, 31.
484 Ibid., 32.
485 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 579.
The body was not *accursed of God* (or lit. “curse of God”) because it was hanging on a tree; it was hanging on a tree because it was accursed of God. And the body was not accursed of God simply because it was dead (for all men die), but it was accursed because of the reason for the death. To break the law of God and live as though he did not matter or exist, was in effect to curse him; and he who cursed God would be accursed of God. To break the law of God and incur the penalty of death, was to die the worst possible kind of death, for the means of death was a formal and terminal separation from the community of God’s people. Hence the use of this verse in Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians is very forceful. Christ took upon himself the curse of the law, the penalty of death, thereby redeeming us from the curse of the law. The manner of his death, crucifixion, symbolized dramatically the meaning of his death. His separation from the family of God made possible our admission to the family of God, because the curse of the broken law—which would have permanently barred admission—had been removed.\(^{489}\)

The cross was an especially horrible experience for the Savior in that He was suspended between heaven and earth and rejected by God while He was alive. He experienced the suffering of hell, the outer darkness and separation from His Father while bleeding and dying on the cross. Our Lord endured the curse of the law, the full penalty for the sins of His people.

The cross (bibiically defined) is the centerpiece of the gospel. It points us to a number of things regarding Christ’s suffering and death. a) Jesus suffered a judicial death. He was not just a martyr or an example, but was a sacrificial victim. The cross tells us that our Lord removed the curse, penalty and liability of punishment that we deserved as a result of breaking God’s holy law. The Bible says the soul that sins must die (Ezek. 18:4; Gen. 2:17); that sin results in separation from God (Isa. 59:2; Gen. 3:23-24) and the eternal agony of suffering in hell (Rev. 20:15). Our Lord endured hell, separation from God, the curse of the law and a bloody death on the cross that we might have eternal life. “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:8). The Savior “made peace through the blood of the cross” (Col. 1:20). Jesus “wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). On the cross the absolute holiness and righteousness of God comes together with His amazing love, compassion and mercy. Sin is not ignored, overlooked or set aside but paid for in full by Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice.

b) The cross points us to the intense vicarious suffering that our Lord endured. The essence of Christ’s atoning work is in His suffering. God’s law and justice require that sinners suffer and die. All the suffering and misery in this world and hell itself is the reward for sin. The sting of death is in the torments of hell. The second death is the intensification of the suffering that sin merits. On the cross our Lord satisfied the penal obligation of the law. His suffering delivered us from the suffering that we deserved. John Dick writes,

Of the various modes of taking away life by violence, crucifixion is probably the most tormenting. It is one of the many contrivances of barbarity, the object of which is to make the unhappy sufferer feel himself dying. He was fixed to the cross with nails driven through his hands and his feet. Besides the exquisite pain caused by the perforation of so many parts full of nerves, which are the instruments of sensation, great torment must have arisen from the distension of his body, the forcible stretching of its joints and sinews by its own weight. To this

circumstance he alludes in the twenty-second Psalm: “I may tell all my bones” [v. 17]. “All my bones are out of joint” [v. 14].

c) The death on the cross was bloody. Jesus’ blood was poured out upon the earth in order to save His people. This sacrificial act of a blood sacrifice was typified throughout the Old Testament. The rite of bloody sacrifice set forth the truth that the satisfaction for the guilt of sin could only be accomplished by the pouring out of the sinless blood of Christ. Dabney writes,

Until the Lamb of God came and took away the guilt of the world, God’s requirement of bloody sacrifice was invariable. From Abel down to Zachariah, the father of John, in order that believers might pray, the smoke of the burning victim must ascend from the central altar. The Apostle Paul has summed up the invariable history in the words (Heb. ix. 22), “And without shedding of blood is no remission.” But this awful rite, the death and burning of an innocent and living creature, could typify but one truth, substitution. Compared with the milder ritual of the new dispensation, bloody sacrifice was more expensive and inconvenient, yet God regularly required it. It is manifest that his object was to keep this great truth, penal substitution, prominent before the minds of sinful men…

Jesus went to the cross and suffered unimagined torment because all the guilt of every sin committed by the elect throughout all history was imputed to Him on the cross. He suffered the severe pain of crucifixion, the horrors of the wrath of God, the buffeting of the Satanic hosts, the abandonment and hatred of His own people, the mocking of the crowds and worst of all the spiritual miseries of His Father’s desertion. He suffered the most appalling torture, terror, dread, anguish and sadness to set us free from sin and guilt. He was overwhelmed with the curse so that we could have peace with God and be adopted into His own family. Our only hope in this life and the life to come is found in Christ crucified. “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Ac. 4:12).

There are some important questions that you need to ask yourself regarding the Savior’s sacrificial death on the cross. Are you trusting in the redeeming power of Jesus’ blood? Do you believe that this precious atoning blood has washed away all of your sins? Are you relying on the death of Christ to reconcile you to a thrice holy God? Do you have the peace that surpasses all understanding, knowing that on account of the Son’s saving blood God is no longer angry with you and that because of Jesus He loves you with a love eternal and unchangeable? Creature, do you want to be at peace with your Creator? Finite little man, do you want Almighty God to be your friend? You cannot have fellowship with God except through Christ’s atonement. God has set forth Jesus to be a propitiation for our sins. Receive that propitiation through faith in His blood and have peace and fellowship with Him.

(3) As our Lord walked to Golgotha, Jesus spoke words of prophetic warning to some women who were mourning Him. This incident is only recorded in Luke’s account: “And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning unto them said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. For, behold, the days are coming, in which they shall say, “Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.” Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, “Fall on us;” and to the hills, “Cover us.” For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry’” (23:27-31).

Regarding this event we will examine: a) the daughters of Jerusalem; b) the women’s weeping; c) the Savior’s words to these women; and d) a specific application.

a) These weeping and wailing women are identified as “the daughters of Jerusalem.” This identification means that this group of women was not made up of Galileans and others who had come to the feast, but rather were city dwellers. They were women who lived in Jerusalem. This designation tells us that these women were not necessarily disciples of Christ who were crying over their Lord. It also helps us understand the why of the Savior’s dire prophetic warning. Jerusalem would be a scene of horrors and misery in only one generation. “The following prophecy concerning Jerusalem was directed to those who would suffer most in the coming tribulation—the women of Jerusalem.”

Although these women are not mocking Jesus but rather lamenting Him, there is no evidence that they were believers. In fact, the immediate context indicates that they were not Christians. Our Lord’s prophetic warning did not apply to the disciples, for they fled the city and escaped its destruction (see Mt. 24:15-20; Lk. 21:20-23).

b) Luke says that these women mourned and lamented Jesus. There are a number of things that we need to note regarding the mourning of these women.

First, the words that are used to describe this mourning are quite strong. The first verb “mourned” (kopto) could be translated “to beat one’s breast with grief” or “to bewail.” The second word (threnco) translated “lamented” (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NASB) means to “mourn” or “wail for.” “These two verbs are traditionally found together in the culture of that time, especially in describing women weeping. They wailed loudly and almost uncontrollably.” In antiquity and even in certain cultures today women express mourning in a very loud, dramatic manner. These women were raising their culture’s death wail over our Lord because He was on His death march and therefore was regarded as one who was as good as dead. Some scholars believe that these wailing women had formed themselves into a group with the task of mourning for Jews who were condemned by the Romans for being revolutionaries. “The pious women of Jerusalem often went to mourn the executed, providing a narcotic drink to dull the victim’s pain.” That these women may have been a distinct group is supported by the fact that Jesus turned and faced them. This indicates that the women were standing together and were not dispersed throughout the crowd. Second, their weeping was not rooted in faith in Christ, but in hopelessness. While their weeping was certainly better than the mocking, it nevertheless had nothing to do with genuine biblical knowledge or faith and thus was rebuked by the Savior.

There is often an assumption in professing Christian circles that people who are quick to shed tears and are very emotional are the most pious. This view is especially common in Charismatic circles where often strong emotions are equated with the fullness or manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This passage teaches us that emotions are not a reliable guide in discerning the work of the Holy Spirit. There are emotions that flow from a regenerate heart and there are emotions that are rooted in ignorance, unbelief and even idolatry. “The dying of the Lord Jesus may perhaps move natural affection in many that are strangers to devout affections; many bewail Christ that do not believe in him, and lament him that do not love him at all.”

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495 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:824.
affections,’ says Burkill, ‘are not infallible marks of grace, even when they proceed from a sense of Christ’s sufferings.’

This truth has been recently demonstrated by the film, “The Passion of the Christ,” which attempts to represent the last twelve hours of Jesus’ life. This Roman Catholic propaganda piece (which blasphemously purports to represent God incarnate, an explicit violation of the first, second and third commandments) brought multitudes of people to tears by showing the physical suffering inflicted upon their representation of the Savior. Did the fact that secular humanists, unrepentant homosexuals, Roman Catholic idolaters, atheists and Buddhists were emotionally affected by the make-believe images of cruelty and brutality to the Roman Catholic actor who was pretending to be the Son of God demonstrate true saving faith? Of course not! True, genuine biblical emotions must follow understanding and faith in Christ as He is revealed in Scripture. The women of Jerusalem were not weeping for the Messiah who was going to the cross to die as a sacrifice for their sins. They very likely (given our Lord’s response) were weeping for a man they viewed as a Jewish zealot or revolutionary.

c) Jesus speaks His last words before His crucifixion to these “daughters of Jerusalem.” Our Lord tells these mourners to do two things.

First, the Savior orders the women to stop weeping for Him: “Do not weep for Me” (Lk. 23:28). (“In negative commands the present imperative often means as it does here to stop an action already begun.”) This command raises the question. What possibly could be wrong with weeping for Jesus as He walks to Golgotha? He was a hideous sight: beaten, bruised, swollen, with a back opened up by the lash. What is wrong with sympathizing with such suffering? Our Lord corrected these women for a number of reasons.

As noted, a weeping without biblical knowledge and faith is merely a worldly spectacle. “These women were not weeping for the sins of their rulers in sending Jesus to the cross, for the sins of the crowd that did send Jesus to death, for the sins of their nation which could reject David’s son, for their own sins as daughters of this wicked Jerusalem.” Such ignorant, faithless weeping may make a person feel better afterward subjectively, but it is meaningless and accomplishes nothing. The Messiah is not looking for a mindless, emotional outburst, but for faith in Himself as Lord and Savior. “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom.14:23).

Also, Christ is in complete control of His destiny and goes to the cross boldly to accomplish redemption for His people. “Unlike the women, Jesus is not overtaken by a fate for which he is ill prepared: in full obedience to His Father he goes to his appointed destiny, through death and to glory.” Calvin writes,

These words do indeed show plainly with what exalted fortitude Christ was endued; for he could not have spoken in this manner, if he had not advanced to death with a steady and firm step. But the principal object is to show, that under this mean and revolting aspect he is still under the eye of God, and that wicked men, who now proudly triumph, as if they had obtained a victory, will not long enjoy their foolish mirth, for it will quickly be followed by an astonishing change.

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498 Ibid.
The Savior makes it very clear that even in His supreme state of humiliation, as He steps into the abyss of spiritual suffering, He does not need anyone’s sympathy. He voluntarily offers Himself on the cross and He is fully aware that His suffering is unto victory.

Second, Jesus warns these women about their own fate. “Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, blessed are the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed” (Lk. 23:28-29). The women are told to weep for themselves and for their children. This statement indicates that these women are not disciples, but are on the broad path that leads to destruction. The vast majority of Jerusalem’s population consisted of unregenerate Jews (Lk. 13:34, 35; Mt. 23:37, 38). Our Lord shows His concern for these women by warning them of the doom that awaits unbelieving, unrepentant sinners. People who are still in their sins need to start mourning over their sin and guilt. If they sob tears of repentance like Peter (Lk. 22:62), then their tears are not shed in vain. Matthew Henry’s application of this verse is right on the mark:

Note, When with an eye of faith we behold Christ crucified we ought to weep, not for him, but for ourselves. We must not be affected with the death of Christ as with the death of a common person whose calamity we pity, or of a common friend whom we are likely to part with. The death of Christ was a thing peculiar; it was his victory and triumph over his enemies; it was our deliverance, and the purchase of eternal life for us. And therefore let us weep, not for him, but for our own sins, and the sins of our children, that were the cause of his death; and weep for fear (such were the tears here prescribed) of the miseries we shall bring upon ourselves, if we slight his love and reject his grace, as the Jewish nation did which brought upon them the ruin here foretold.\(^{501}\)

The reason Jesus gives these women to weep is that the days are coming that women who had never had any children would be regarded as fortunate. The Savior’s statement would be shocking and radical to Jewish women who viewed barrenness almost as a curse itself. Christ is setting before these women a dark future of judgment “in which the natural values of the present will be reversed.”\(^{502}\) Because the Jews have rejected and murdered the Messiah, God is going to turn their world upside down. The suffering Servant is speaking of God’s coming vengeance upon Jerusalem that would be the climax of the Jewish-Roman war (A.D. 66-70).

The phrase literally translated from the Greek as “behold days are coming” is Septuagintal language (cf. Jer. 7:32; 16:14; 38:31) which points to the absolute certainty of God’s judgment. Such horrifying events are to come upon Jerusalem that women would be much better off if they did not have to worry about caring for their children. Watching one’s children starve to death in a siege would be a fate worse than being killed oneself. “Josephus reports that some mothers were reduced to eating their children during the famine in Rome’s siege against Jerusalem, A.D. 66-77 (cf. Lev. 26:29; Deut. 28:53; 2 Kings 6:29).”\(^{503}\) “Many of the women to whom our Lord here spoke might easily have been living forty years after, when Titus took Jerusalem, to see and experience the indescribable horrors of the siege, but it must have been mostly the generation of their children who suffered the destruction itself.”\(^{504}\)

In recording this incident Luke is reminding his readers that our Lord had explicitly predicted Jerusalem’s fall. “For these are days of vengeance, that all things which are written

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\(^{501}\) Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:824.


may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those
days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by
the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations” (Lk. 21:22-24). He is also
emphasizing that, even in His estate of humiliation, Christ is a divine judge. “Even now at his
crucifixion Luke portrayed Jesus not so much as the judged but the Judge (cf. Acts 10:42; 17:31)
who was fully in control of the situation.”505 The Savior was always very conscious that the cross
was not a defeat; but rather, a victory.

To emphasize the terrible judgment coming upon Jerusalem our Lord quotes Hosea 10:8,
“Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’” (Lk.
23:30). The wrath of the Lamb and agony of divine judgment will cause the people to call upon
the mountains and hills to cover them, to crush them and put them out of their misery. This is a
statement of the utmost despair. They would rather be swallowed up by the earth than suffer the
long, drawn-out, lingering torments of God’s retribution. The daily and continuing horrors of the
siege will cause the people to long for death. “Christ taught by these words that the Jews would
at length feel that they had made war, not with a mortal man, but with God. Thus shall the
enemies of God reap the just reward of their impious rage, when they who formerly dared even
to attack heaven, shall in vain desire to employ the earth as a shield against his vengeance.”506
This aspect is brought out in Revelation 6:16 where the wicked call upon the mountains and
rocks saying, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the
wrath of the Lamb!” These daughters of Jerusalem needed to understand that the cross would
lead to the empty tomb; that the bloodied, disfigured, half-dead Man before them would soon
ascend to the throne of God and rule over all nations. The suffering servant was about to become
the all-powerful King over kings.

Jesus supports His prophecy with a proverbial sounding statement about green and dry
wood. “For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry” (Lk. 23:31)?
The adjective translated green (hygros) literally means “wet or moist.” Our Lord’s saying
presupposes the use of fire as a symbol of judgment. The vast majority of interpreters believe
that the moist, green wood refers to the Savior, while the dried out wood refers to apostate Israel.
The point is that if God did not spare His only begotten Son who was perfectly righteous (and
thus moist) and did not deserve to be burned (i.e. crucified and killed); then, will not the divine
judgment fall upon the Jewish nation which is unbelieving, wicked and apostate (and thus dry)
and is ready for the fire? “‘If they (that is the Romans) treat me who am innocent so cruelly, what
will be done to the GUILTY?'”507 This proverb emphasizes the inevitability of the coming
judgment and its severity. If the Jews do not call upon Christ as their Lord and Savior, then they
will call upon the mountains to cover them.

d) Jesus’ words to the daughters of Jerusalem tell us something very important about the
preaching of the gospel. While the word “gospel” means “good news” we must not forget that, to
those who refuse to repent and turn to Christ, the gospel reveals the justice and wrath of God. As
Paul says, “For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and
among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the
other the aroma of life leading to life” (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

The gospel is never preached in vain. It leads to either life or death. To those who neglect
it and refuse to receive it, its proclamation is death. “He who believes in the Son has everlasting

life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (Jn. 3:36). Hodge writes,

As Christ is to some a tried corner stone, elect and precious, the rock of their salvation, to others he is a stone of offence. 1 Pet. 2, 7. 8. So the gospel and its ministers are the cause of life to some, and of death to others, and to all they are either the one or the other. The word of God is quick and powerful either to save or to destroy. It cannot be neutral. If it does not save, it destroys. “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light,” John 3, 19. “If I had not come and spoken unto them they had not had sin,” John 15, 22. If a man rejects the gospel, it had been far better for him never to have heard it. It will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for him.508

In our day many churches adhere to the idea that the gospel must be made as inoffensive as possible if people are to make a profession of faith and join the local church. Therefore, crucial biblical doctrines such as sin, judgment and hell are either greatly down-played or ignored altogether. Our Lord’s statement to the women of Jerusalem completely refutes all such thinking. While it is true that Jesus preached mercy, pardon, love and forgiveness, He also preached justice, judgment and wrath. The Savior spoke more about hell and its terrors than the prophets and apostles combined. In fact, the most terrifying imagery and detailed descriptions of hell are found in the discourses of the Redeemer. The gospel cannot be properly preached or understood apart from the doctrine of God, the righteousness of the moral law and the consequences of breaking it. Therefore, when Paul witnessed to Felix “he reasoned about righteousness, self control, and the judgment to come” (Ac. 24:25). When the apostle preached the gospel to the Athenians he said, “God…now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He had ordained” (Ac. 17:30-31). We never see Christ or the apostles soft-pedaling the gospel as another pop-psychology gimmick, a smart lifestyle choice or a path to health, wealth and happiness.

The gospel includes the love and mercy of God and also the justice and holiness of God. “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven…. For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:25, 29). J. C. Ryle writes,

There is wrath revealed in the Gospel for those who harden themselves in wickedness. The same cloud which was bright to Israel was dark to the Egyptians. The same Lord Jesus who invites the labouring and heavy-laden to come to Him and rest, declares most plainly that unless a man repents he will perish, and that he who believeth not shall be damned. (Luke xiii. 3. Mark xvi. 16.) The same Saviour who now holds out His hands to the disobedient and gainsaying, will come one day in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those that know not God and obey not the Gospel. (2 Thess. i. 8.) Let those things sink down into our hearts. Christ is indeed most gracious. But the day of grace must come to an end at last. An unbelieving world will find at length, as Jerusalem did, that there is judgment with God as well as mercy. No wrath will fall so heavily as that which has been long accumulating and heaping up.509

The gospel tells us that God hates sin so much that He sent the Son of His love to the cross to suffer the curse of the law and the suffering of hell to pay for the sin imputed to Him. If God was willing to do this to His only begotten Son, then what will He do with those who trample the blood of Christ underfoot as worthless, who obstinately continue in a life of sin? The bitter sufferings of our Lord for imputed sin should make us stand in awe of the justice and holiness of God. Those people who turn the gospel in to a self-help therapy, a self-esteem philosophy or a tool for a more hedonistic life are simply not preaching the gospel.

Chapter 14: The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ

And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted thereof, he would not drink. And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, “They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.” And sitting down they watched him there; and set up over his head his accusation written, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS. Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left. And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying, “Thou that destroyest the temple, and buldest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.” Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, “He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth. (Mt. 27:33-44; cf. Mk. 24-32)

And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.” And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, and saying, “If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.” And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. (Lk. 23:33-38)

Where they crucified him, and two other with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst. And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin. Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate, “Write not, ‘The King of the Jews;’ but that he said, ‘I am King of the Jews.’” Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.” Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, “Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be:” that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, “They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots.” These things therefore the soldiers did. Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith
unto his mother, “Woman, behold thy son!” Then saith he to the disciple, “Behold thy mother!” And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. (Jn. 19:18-27)

Introduction

We now come to the climax of the gospels and the central focus of the Scriptures—the crucifixion of Christ. As we examine this section of Scripture there are a number of things to keep in mind. First, we are considering a historical narrative that is concise, varied and rich in details. It is important that we focus our attention on every detail of His sorrows and every word from His dying lips. Therefore, we will examine each event or statement in chronological order.

Second, the gospels describe the crucifixion of our Lord in a historical, matter of fact manner. The accounts are economical, but powerful.510

Among the astounding features of the Scriptures are the records of the supreme events—one word only to describe the scourging of God’s Son, one only for the crucifixion, one only for the resurrection. Events so tremendous, words so restrained! Who guided all these writers to write in such an astonishing manner? This is one of the plain marks of divine inspiration in the very product itself. Matthew uses only a participle as if the crucifixion were the minor act that was subsidiary to the apportioning of the clothes. Luke has a simple aorist to express the fact, John likewise. Mark alone has stauros auton [‘they crucified Him’], the vivid, descriptive present tense. The intention of all the evangelists is evidently not to describe the awful act of crucifixion. The fact, not the details, is to fill the reader’s mind.511

Therefore, the gruesome details of the crucifixion and the physical suffering involved are omitted. The focus is on the humiliation of Christ (the placard, the mocking crowds, the two thieves); the fulfillment of prophecy (Ps. 22:1, 7, 8, 18; 69:21); the Savior’s utterances from the cross; and the agony of separation from God (e.g., the darkness, the cry of despair). The main purpose of the gospels at this point is not to go into an exposition of the meaning of Christ’s sacrificial death, but rather to set it forth as the concrete, historical foundation of redemption. It is the historical reality that undergirds all of redemptive history and is the focal point of the whole New Testament. The gospel writers record the facts without any attempt “to play on the heartstrings of their readers.”512 The witness as to who the Mediator was and the significance of these events is only told through the historical events themselves. The first confessors are a condemned criminal and a Gentile centurion (Lk. 23:41-42; Jn. 19:47). God’s commentary is

only found in the miraculous events during the final three hours and immediately upon the death of Christ.

Third, although crucifixion is perhaps the most violent, shocking, terrifying, degrading and painful method of execution devised by man, the spiritual soul suffering that Jesus endured when He was separated from God the Father was almost infinitely greater than any physical suffering He endured. Roman Catholic writers, theologians and movie makers who spend a great deal of time focusing on every aspect of the physical sufferings of Jesus while neglecting the soul sufferings are guilty of distorting the gospel. Thousands upon thousands of Jews were tortured and crucified by the Romans in the first century. But, all of their suffering put together pales in comparison to what the Savior endured when He was abandoned by His Father and He descended into hell.

Sour Wine Mingled with Gall

After Jesus was brought to Golgotha and immediately before His crucifixion, He was offered “sour wine mingled with gall” (Mt. 27:34). The Greek word for “gall” (chole) refers to bile or a bitter substance. The same word is used in the LXX translation of Psalm 69:21: “They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” The word was used to describe narcotics and even poisons because of their bitter taste.

Mark identifies the substance as myrrh (Mk. 15:23). Among the ancients a little myrrh or other perfumes mixed with myrrh was considered a delicacy (cf. Pliny…‘The finest wine in early days was spiced with the scent of myrrh’…) Myrrh is “a resinous gum used for perfume and flavouring (including wine) and as an embalming ointment.” The fact that the wine offered was bitter indicates that the amount used was not to flavor the wine, but to drug it. Cyril (cat.

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513 A Dutch physician describes the intense physical suffering of crucifixion as follows: “The unnatural, constrained position of the body with its arms spread outwards for so long a time must have been a torture which cannot be described in words. This is especially true because not the slightest movement could be made without causing unbearable pain to the whole body but particularly to the impaled hands and feet and to the back, made raw as it had been by the scourging. The nails had been driven through the body at precisely the places where numerous sensitive nerves ran together. Some of these were excited, and others suppressed, a situation causing the severest pain, and one which must gradually have increased. The irritated parts of the body, gradually exposed to the influence of the air, must slowly have become swollen and bruised. The same result must have taken place in other parts where the liquids of the body were held back by the tremendous tension and consequently were frustrated. Now the pain of the inflammation in these parts could only increase from moment to moment. The blood which is carried to all parts of the body through the arteries by the left auricle could not find room enough in these badly inflamed and swollen parts, and consequently would have to flow to the head in greater proportions than usual, would have to distend and press hard on the arteries there, and thus cause ever increasing headache. However, because of this hindrance in the circulation of the blood the left auricle could not find room enough in these badly inflamed and swollen parts, and consequently would have to flow to the head in greater proportions than usual, would have to distend and press hard on the arteries there, and thus cause ever increasing headache. However, because of this hindrance in the circulation of the blood the left auricle would be unable to send out all of its blood, and consequently would be unable to receive all of the blood coming to it from the right auricle. There was, therefore, no free circulation of the blood in the lungs. This would cause the heart itself to be oppressed; all the arteries would necessarily feel the added pressure; and an unspeakable sense of oppression had to result.

Add to these considerations the fact that the person could never turn or adjust himself amid all his pain, inasmuch as the head alone was free. The body was persistently in an unnatural position. This meant that a gradual stiffening of nerves, arteries, and muscles had to result. Nor must we forget that a burning oriental sun beat down upon the condemned man. There was not a blade of grass to cast its shadow upon the cross. Fiendishly annoying insects hummed around him, and settled upon the open wounds, aggravating the pains.” (P. Biesterveld as quoted by Klaas Schilder in Christ Crucified, 109-110).

514 Craig A. Evans, Mark 8:27-16:20, 501.

xiii. 29) notes that “gall and myrrh possess a common property… and Mt. with the prophecy in view [Ps. 69:21] may have [deliberately] described the myrrh as *chole.*” 516 “In the first century A.D. the army physician, Dioscorides Pedanius, who made an intensive study of almost 600 plants and 1,000 drugs, observed the narcotic properties of myrrh (*Materia Medica* I. lxiv.3).” 517

This offer of a stupefying drink raises two questions. First, who offered our Lord this drink? And, second why did Jesus refuse to drink it?

The Scriptures do not give us any information regarding who offered the drugged sour wine to Christ. Therefore, one can only offer an educated guess regarding this act. Most commentators believe that the drink was offered by a group of women from Jerusalem who had formed a sort of society for this purpose. “This possibility is supported by the mention in *b. Sanh. 43a* that women from Jerusalem…used to provide for those being led out to execution a drink of ‘wine containing a grain of frankincense’ in order to dull the pain.” 518 These women may have based their actions on Proverbs 31:6. “Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to those who are bitter of heart.” These may be the same women who wept over Christ as He walked through the streets of Jerusalem.

There is a remote possibility that the Roman soldiers themselves offered the drug to the Savior either on orders from Pilate who knew that Jesus was innocent or perhaps to make their job of crucifixion a little easier. A drugged man would be easier to nail to a cross and would be less liable to spend his time on the cross screaming in agony. Given the Roman reputation for brutality and the lack of historical evidence for such a practice, the first view is much more likely.

Whoever offered the Savior this drink did not succeed in getting Him to take the liquid. The verb Matthew uses (*ethele*) indicates that the drink was repeatedly offered to Christ, “but he kept refusing…and so refused decisively (Mark, the aorist).” 519 Why did our Lord emphatically reject this drugged sour wine? There are a number of important reasons.

First, the Mediator had to reject the drugged cup in order faithfully to drink the cup of God’s wrath set before Him. As soon as He tasted the drink mingled with gall He refused it (Mt. 27:34). We know He refused it when He tasted the narcotic because He did not refuse the non-drugged vinegar offered to Him a few hours later (Mt. 27:48). Jesus knew that He was about to suffer and die as a substitutionary sacrifice for His people. He knew that all the pain, terror, humiliation, suffering and horror that they deserved would be experienced by Him on the cross. Our Lord understood that a crucial aspect of the curse of the law and the suffering in hell was both the sensation of pain and the great psychological torment. Therefore, anything that would deaden the senses, alleviate the pain, ease the terror or calm the psychological torment must be rejected. If Christ had drunk of this drugged cup He would have been guilty of setting aside His Father’s will. He would have abandoned His people to an eternal curse. Therefore, the moment He tasted of it He emphatically set it aside.

It is important to understand that this drugged cup was a temptation of the devil. It was a strong, clever, devious temptation in that the Savior was very thirsty as a result of the blood loss from flogging. Further, the temptation came without any warning whatsoever. He did not know it was drugged until it was placed upon His lips. What man would reject a drink while literally dying of thirst? What kind of person would reject a pain killer who knew he was about to be

516 Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark*, 379.
nailed to a cross with spikes and suspended in agony? Who could refuse a mind-numbing elixir when he knew he was about to enter the pit of hell itself with all of its terrors magnified millions of times over? Only Jesus, the second Adam, could and did offer unto God such a perfect obedience. The Mediator knew that this was a temptation and He knew what was at stake. If He drank that narcotic drink, then the whole incarnation, the whole 33 and a half years of perfect obedience, humiliation and suffering would be completely wasted and brought to nothing. The multitudes of people chosen by the Father and given to the Son as a gift of love and compassion would all die in their sins. Therefore, without so much as a split second of forethought, Christ spurns the drugged cup.

The second Adam is faithful. The blessed Son of God will bear the curse and the pain of hell for us. With His mind perfectly clear, He of His own volition walks into the curse and hell for us. He refused the drug. He refused it spontaneously. Even in His weakened state He understood what was happening and immediately rejected it. The second Adam—God’s obedient Son—wrought the most rapid and stealthy attack of Satan. Nothing would drive a wedge between Him and His Father except the imputed sins of the elect.

Second, Jesus had to reject the drugged cup in order to be a faithful high priest. We must not forget the fact that our Lord was the One in charge of His own sacrifice. The author of Hebrews says that Christ “does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices first for his own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered Himself” (7:27). The Old Testament teaches that the priests were responsible before God to go about their work with alertness, sobriety or a clear mind. Leviticus 10:9-11 reads, “Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses.”

If the Savior had accepted the drugged cup He would have violated God’s law and would not have been in a position to offer Himself up or minister to others while on the cross. Schilder writes,

Because He is the Mediator, the Mediator of God and men. If in this most momentous hour He should deaden His spirit, then He, overagainst God as well as overagainst His people, would be doing wrong. Then He could not have represented God overagainst the people and could not have represented the people overagainst God. Then He would not have been the minister of the Word who in what He says and what He does not say, rightly proclaims the truth and justice of God to men. Then He would not have been the intercessor for His people, even though the hour now demands that He be that. Then we would have lost the seven utterances on the cross, voicing as they do a great love and a great passion.520

The Title on the Cross

After telling us that Jesus is crucified all the gospel writers mention the title on the cross over the Savior’s head. The reason for this is the unusual nature of the sign, the events surrounding it (cf. Jn. 19:19ff.) and its significance. While it was customary for the Romans to place a placard around the neck of the condemned and then affix the tablet to the cross, the placard above Christ is very unusual. The Savior is not accused of being a revolutionary,

520 Klaas Schilder, Christ Crucified, 96.
murderer or brigand but is said to be a King. Pilate deliberately used the wording that emanated from the chief priests, except he stated it as a fact, not as the delusion of a mad man or imposter. Why did the governor do this? Did he believe that the Mediator was truly a king? It is likely that Pilate was very angry at the Jewish leaders for forcing his hand against Jesus and made the sign as an act of revenge. He knew that such a statement would infuriate the leaders of Israel.

John’s more full account of the inscription and the events surrounding it indicates that the Jewish leaders did not learn of the contents of the sign until after the Messiah was crucified. As soon as they saw the inscription they went or sent emissaries to Pilate demanding that the contents of the sign be changed from a statement of fact “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” to a statement indicating that Jesus was a liar, a fraud, an imposter (“Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘He said, I am the King of the Jews’” [Jn. 19:21]). Pilate, however, finally got some backbone and emphatically refused to change the inscription (“What I have written, I have written” [Jn. 19:22]). God did not allow the governor “to change the truth into a lie; the Kingship of Jesus stands unalterably fast.”

There are a number of important things to note regarding the significance of this inscription. First, God by His special providence wants the world to know that His Son was crucified as King. As the divine-human Mediator there is an inseparable connection between the kingship of Christ and His sacrificial death. Obviously, as God, the second person of the trinity, the Messiah is both LORD and King over all creation. The triune God (the eternal Son included) has dominion over all as an aspect of His nature (read Ps. 10:16; 24:8; 29:10; 47:2; 95:3). Even before the crucifixion the Savior was a King with a kingdom (cf. Jn. 18:36; Mt. 12:28; Lk. 16:16; 17:21). However, as the divine-human Mediator His kingdom is established with power as a result of His crucifixion (Mt. 28:18-20; Rom. 1:4; Mk. 9:1; Eph. 1:20-21; Ac. 2:36; 5:31; Rev. 3:21; etc.). It is ironic that Satan, the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities secured Christ’s victory by nailing Him to the cross. The cross established Jesus as the King with power and authority over all, forever (cf. Dan. 7:9-14). The blood-stained title is the announcement to the world that the Nazarene is eliminating sin and is dealing a death-crushing blow to Satan and his kingdom. By His death He conquered death and established the kingdom of grace.

Second, John’s account says that the inscription was written in Hebrew (i.e. Aramaic), Latin and Greek. These were the languages of the civilized world. The Mediator was, indeed, the King of the Jews; but He was crucified in order that he may be the king of a spiritual and universal kingdom. In this kingdom established by the blood of Christ there will be no racial, national or ethnic distinctions. It is a kingdom for the whole world (Jn. 3:16); for the Latin-speaking Roman, the Aramaic-speaking Jew and Samaritan; and, the Greek-speaking peoples from Asia Minor, Greece and the far-off colonies—“yes, the elect from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation’ (Rev. 5:9)—are the citizens.” God is declaring “that Jesus is a King for everyone. He is not merely a Jewish Savior, though he is that. He is the Savior of the Greeks and Romans as well. He is the Savior of the world.”

John says that our Lord was crucified near the city. Being Passover week, there were many people from different nations who would have witnessed the crucifixion and seen the inscription. The educated Greeks, proselytes and Hellenistic Jews; the Roman soldiers, officials and Latin-speaking Jews; and the Aramaic-speaking Jews would all have understood the title over the Savior’s battered and bleeding head. John even observes that many of the Jews read the

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521 Dauer as quoted by George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 347.
God was proclaiming His Son as the King before many witnesses and was preparing the nation for the great salvation of souls at Pentecost. “All would go away to spread the tidings that one Jesus, the King of the Jews, had been put to death by crucifixion at the Passover feast.”

The Lord thus declared that the time was at hand when He would make everywhere known the name of His Son. The sacrifice of Christ forever secured the salvific title of King for the theanthropic Mediator and guaranteed that all men would bow the knee to Jesus as Lord either in this world or in the world to come (Phil. 2:8-11). It was the handwriting nailed to that cross spiritually that made the handwriting on that placard so significant. As Peter would soon say, “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Ac. 2:36).

The title by way of implication says that the Savior is the King or Lord over every sphere of life. “Hebrew was the language of religion; Greek of science, culture and philosophy; Latin of law. In each of these realms Christ is ‘king.’ In the religious, He is the final revelation of the true God (Heb. 1:2; John 14:9). In science He is the Force behind all things. ‘By him all things consist’ (Col. 1:17). ‘Upholding all things by the world of his power’ (Heb. 1:3); so, too, in Him are hid ‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:3). In jurisprudence, He is supreme; the Law-giver and Law-administrator (1 Cor. 9:21).”

God is a witness that His Son, affixed to the gibbet of execution, dying and bleeding for sinners, will by His sacrifice achieve a complete victory and preeminence in all things. The cross is the centerpiece of all human history. Everything from science to music and architecture must be done with an eye to the glory of the crucified King.

Third, John’s account which tells us that the inscription was written in three different languages helps us answer enemies of the truth who seek contradictions in Scripture. Some unbelieving scholars view the minor differences between the titles in the gospels as mistakes. This type of thinking is easily refuted if we keep in mind a few pertinent points. a) The gospel writers could have been moved by the Holy Spirit to translate one or another of the different languages (e.g., Matthew—Hebrew; Luke—Greek). It is likely that the Hebrew, Greek and Latin titles were not identical. b) An even more likely explanation is that some gospel writers were not moved to record every word, but selected only the words they thought necessary to tell the story. “The full text would have been: This is [translated by Matthew and Luke] Jesus [given by Matthew and John], of Nazareth [added by John alone], the King of the Jews [provided by all four writers].”

Jesus’ Prayer of Forgiveness

While Christ was being nailed to the cross or immediately after, our Lord spoke the first words uttered during the crucifixion. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Lk. 23:34). This is one of the seven sayings from the cross. This prayer is amazing when we consider the timing of it, the people for whom the Mediator prayed and the contents of the prayer.

(1) The Savior had just been nailed to the cross. The severe pain of the spikes in His broken and torn flesh was greatly accentuated when He was suspended above the earth. His

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executioners were below dividing up His clothes, while the mob mocked Him and laughed. As His sacrificial blood began to flow freely the great High Priest begins to intercede for His foes. One could reasonably expect a man unjustly sentenced to death, brutally scourged, and heartlessly mocked to call down the wrath of God on his enemies. But Jesus does the opposite. He asks His Father to forgive them. No doubt the Holy Spirit would pierce the soul of many people with these words when the time for their conversion came.

The timing of this prayer indicates the intimate relationship between the death of Christ and His high priestly work of intercession. The moment He begins dying, He starts praying. The blessed Savior was not thinking about Himself on the cross at this point, but was thinking about His people. While His body was nailed to the gibbet unable to move, His soul was very active in loving His own. What love is this that a Man would die and even pray for His enemies during His agonizing death (cf. Rom. 5:10)? This, beloved, is concrete proof of our Lord’s infinite love toward unworthy, vile sinners. No one is too wicked or too enslaved to sin for Him to reach with His intercession of love and wash with His precious blood. “He found time to pray for His murderers on the cross. Love like this is a love that passeth knowledge. The vilest of sinners have no cause to be afraid of applying to a Savior like this. If we want warrant and encouragement to repent and believe, the passage before us surely supplies enough.”

(2) The passage says, “Father forgive them.” This raises the question. For whom is our Lord praying? Does the word “them” refer to everyone involved in His crucifixion including the chief priests and elders as well as Pilate? Since the word “them” is not specific, the best way to understand this prayer is to interpret it within the broad context of Scripture. This will help us interpret the Savior’s prayer without contradicting other clear sections of the Bible. There are a number of things we can learn about this prayer from the analogy of Scripture.

First, this prayer is a prayer of intercession. What does the Bible teach regarding the intercession of Christ? a) It teaches that Jesus only intercedes for the elect and does not pray for the salvation of the non-elect. In the great high priestly prayer of John 17, our Lord said, “They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word…. I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given me, for they are Yours…. Keep them from the evil one…. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth…. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth. I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one…” (Jn. 17:6, 9, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21). In this prayer the Savior only prays for those who belong to the Father; He does not pray indiscriminately for everyone in the world. He singles out those who are the objects of God’s sovereign grace—the elect—those chosen before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). The Mediator also prays for everyone who in the future will believe in the Word of God and be saved. The Lord does not intercede for reprobates.

b) The Bible teaches that the intercession of Jesus is always efficacious. It cannot fail. “If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 Jn. 2:1). “He continues forever [and] has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). In other words, His people cannot perish because He continually prays for them and His prayers cannot fail. Jesus prayed for Peter and he repented and was restored. Our Lord did not pray for Judas and he committed suicide. The difference between these two men is found in the Mediator’s words to Peter: “I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail” (Lk. 22:32). If the Savior’s intercessory prayers are efficacious when He was in His state of

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weakness and humiliation, then obviously now that He is exalted at the right hand of God, He never pleads in vain. As Spurgeon notes,

With bleeding hands, he yet won the day; with feet fastened to the wood; he was yet triumphant in his pleas; how much more so now the tiara is about his brow, his hand grasps the universal scepter, and his feet are shod with silver sandals, and he is crowned King of kings, and Lord of lords! If tears and cries out of weakness were omnipotent, even more mighty if possible must be that sacred authority which as the risen Priest he claims when he stands before the Father’s throne to mention the covenant which the Father made with him. O ye trembling believers, trust him with your concerns!\(^\text{529}\)

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\text{c) The prayer of the Savior on the cross is a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:12, “And He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” Our Lord’s prayer was not an afterthought but was part of His saving work. As Young notes,}
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\text{Finally, the servant will make intercession for the transgressors. The conjunction suggests a gradation; in addition to having borne the sins of many, the servant will also make intercession for the transgressors. Here again there is a reflection upon a priestly work of the servant, who pleads before God the merit and virtue of his atoning work as the only ground of acceptance of the transgressors for whom he dies. The basis of the intercession is the substitutionary expiation of the servant. “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing” (Rev. 5:12).}\(^\text{530}\)
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\text{On the cross the sacrifice for sin and intercession are brought intimately together. The intimate connection of these priestly acts rules out the idea that He dies for the elect while praying for the non-elect.}
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\text{Some Reformed writers who believe that Christ was praying for everyone involved in the crucifixion without exception argue that this prayer was not offered according to His mediatorial office, but rather was simply a request made as a human. After all, they assert, did not the Redeemer tell us to pray for our enemies and for those who persecute us (Mt. 5:44)? While it is true that we are to abstain from revenge not returning evil for evil (1 Pet. 3:9) and are to pray for our enemies (Mt. 5:44; cf. Rom. 12:20), there is no basis in Scripture for arguing that at times the Savior laid aside His mediatorial or priestly office. Further, (as noted) Isaiah connects the two as part of one work of redemption. Another strong objection to this interpretation is that it has the Father refusing to answer a request of His beloved Son.}
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\text{Second, the Bible explicitly teaches that forgiveness is only given to people who repent and believe in Christ. Jesus said, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:3). “Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity” (Lk. 13:27); “who practice lawlessness” (Mt. 7:23). “Go and sin no more” (Jn. 8:11). He told believers that forgiveness and reconciliation are only to be given to people who first admit their sin and repent. “If he [the sinning brother] hears you [i.e. he acknowledges his sin and repents], you have gained your brother” (Mt. 18:15). “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you saying ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him” (Lk. 17:3-4). When the wicked Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John the Baptist, he said “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Mt. 3:8).}
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\(^\text{530}\) Edward J. Young, The Book of Isaiah, 3:359.
without repentance would contradict the whole Bible and the very message of redemption as taught by John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul. But, forgiveness after true faith and repentance, when the truth would be applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit, as we repeatedly see in the book of Acts, is thoroughly scriptural. The Redeemer prays that the Father would give His people, who out of ignorance were guilty of murdering the author of life, the time, knowledge and special grace necessary for their salvation.

It is important to keep in mind that our Lord did not extend forgiveness, but rather He prayed for it. The only person to whom He gave absolution that day was the penitent criminal. The idea that is rather common today that a good Christian must extend forgiveness to people who are impenitent (e.g., adulterers, murderers, robbers, rapists, etc) has absolutely no support in Scripture. It is a wicked, antinomian, humanistic doctrine that only encourages people to continue in their sins. Therefore, we must pray that God would do a work of sovereign grace upon people’s hearts so that they would be brought to a saving knowledge of Christ and repent of their sins. A prayer for forgiveness presupposes faith as a prior condition of pardon. Therefore, when the Savior prayed to the Father to forgive His enemies, He was praying for God to save them so that they could receive forgiveness. It cannot be doubted “that this prayer was heard by the heavenly Father, and that this was the cause why many of the people afterwards drank by faith the blood which they had shed.”

Third, it is a fact of history that many of the people involved in the crucifixion of the redeemer never repented, were never forgiven, but rather were hardened by God and perished in their sins. In the book of Acts we see the same Jewish leadership with few exceptions persecuting the church of God. Jesus earlier had even prophesied that God would bring vengeance upon these wicked men. Are we to believe that the Redeemer asked God to forgive the very people that he knew would be crushed as reprobates? Obviously, our Lord would not pray for the Father to do something that He knew was contrary to His will.

(3) The contents of Jesus’ prayer support our previous consideration. What does the dying Savior ask God to do? He says, “Forgive them.” What does the word forgive refer to? It refers to the forgiveness of their sins. “It means ‘Blot out their transgressions completely. In thy sovereign grace cause them to repent truly, so that they can be and will be pardoned fully.’”

One could argue that our Lord is simply asking God to forgive them for this one act of ignorance. In other words, the Mediator in different words is saying essentially the same thing as Stephen in the book of Acts, “Lord do not charge them with this sin” (7:60). Although such a view is possible, it is not likely. Stephen is essentially saying, “Do not reckon this sin to their account when You mete out your judgment upon them.” It is not a petition for the complete pardon of sins, but a request for mercy in judgment. Jesus in His role as Mediator is interceding for complete redemption. For a whole generation the gospel of salvation was preached to the Jews and many thousands were converted and had their sins washed in the Lamb’s blood. “On the day of Pentecost three thousand were converted (Acts 2:31, 42); a little later thousands more (Acts 4:4). Even ‘a large number of priests became obedient to the faith’ (Acts 6:7).” God answered the Savior’s prayer. He could have justly destroyed the whole nation of Israel immediately for what the people did. But instead He carefully and lovingly gathered in the elect.

Note also that Jesus addressed God as Father. It was as Son that He both atoned and interceded for His people. Because Christ interceded on our behalf with the Father (the first

533 Ibid.
person of the Godhead) we have eternal life and can address God as Father by adoption (cf. Gal. 4:6). The Mediator in His work of intercession addressed God as Father because in the economy of grace the Father is presented in Scripture as originating and bestowing all saving benefits (Eph. 1:3-5).\(^{534}\) The Father chose the elect in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4); and, they are spoken of as possessions of the Father that are given as a love gift to the Son (Jn. 17:6). The Son atones and intercedes for the elect and is the door or way to the Father. He enables us to go unto God by His merits and His intercession. Our Lord addresses the Father as Father by nature. We are to address the Father by grace. In imitation of Jesus, yet with an eye to our adoption, “we must in prayer call God Father, and come to Him with reverence and confidence, as children to a Father.”\(^{535}\)

Interestingly, this is the last time the Savior addresses God as Father before His death. In all the gospels the Mediator always addresses God as Father, except during the three hours of darkness while hanging on the cross. During this great eclipse of God’s love and fellowship between the Father and Christ, Jesus will address the Father as God (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34).

In this prayer the Mediator gives a reason during His appeal for mercy. After He says, “Father forgive them,” He adds, “For they do not know what they do.” “The persons for whom the prayer was offered were those who were ignorant of the real nature of the act they were performing.”\(^{536}\) The people involved believed they were putting to death an imposter, a false Messiah. In other words, their sin was not a high-handed sin. They did not knowingly and deliberately trample underfoot the Son of God and blaspheme the Holy Spirit. Their sin was not a sin unto death (1 Jn. 5:16) and thus there was still hope for them.

We must be careful not to misconstrue our Lord’s statement and turn ignorance into a virtue. Although the Bible teaches that sins of ignorance are not as grievous and wicked as sins done with knowledge, we must recognize that Christ is not making an excuse for their behavior. Sins of ignorance are still sins and are hated by God. If ignorance were an excuse for sin then lack of knowledge would be a desirable thing. Indeed, ignorance is a frequent contributor to sin and all sorts of wicked thoughts and deeds. Spiritual ignorance is a fountain of heresy. “To use the words of John Gill on this place, our Lord ‘does not mention the ignorance of those He prays for as a plea for pardon, but as a description of their state.’” As Clarke observes, “If ignorance does not excuse a crime, at least it diminishes the intensity of it.”\(^{537}\)

The reason ignorance is sometimes mentioned in these types of contexts is that, obviously, there is much more hope for a person who thinks and does evil out of ignorance than for someone who knows the truth and doesn’t care. Thus, before Peter tells the people who were guilty of rejecting and crucifying the Lord to repent he says, “Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did your rulers” (Ac. 3:17). “Let it be noted that the union of clear head-knowledge of Christ with willful heart-rejection of Him, is the nearest approach that can be made

\(^{534}\) “[T]his is the reason why most frequently, and indeed almost always, in Scripture, we find worship addressed to the Father; rarely to the Son; very rarely to the Holy Spirit” (Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Holy Spirit* [Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Foundation, 1994], 155). Thomas Watson notes that in addressing our prayers to the Father we are addressing all three persons of the Godhead: “Though the Father only be named in the Lord’s prayer, yet the other two Persons are not excluded. The Father is mentioned because he is first in order; but the Son and Holy Ghost are included because they are the same in essence. As all the three Persons subsist in one Godhead, so, in our prayers, though we name but one Person, we must pray to all” (*The Lord’s Prayer* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, (1692) 1960, 2].

\(^{535}\) Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:827.


to the unpardonable sin. St. Paul seems to teach this in the sixth chapter of Hebrews. Above all, he seems to point to this when he says of himself, ‘I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.’ (1 Tim. i. 13) Thus Jesus’ prayer is not based on an excuse, but instead founded upon the mercy of God. Ignorant persons do not deserve to be forgiven. However, once they know the truth they can plead for mercy out of sincere sorrow for such ignorance. “Forgive me Lord, for I was an ignorant fool. I acknowledge the sinfulness of my ignorance and plead for Your tender mercy.”

Our Lord’s prayer on the cross teaches us that it is appropriate to pity and pray for people who out of ignorance serve their false gods and even persecute Christians. We are to have the mind of Christ and pray for our enemies; treat them lawfully and compassionately. After all, many of us at one time were ignorant idolaters who were at war with God. We who have received undeserved favor and mercy must extend mercy to others. The imitation of the Redeemer in this area is often very difficult. However, if we remember that at one time we were blind and full of rage against the truth, praying for such people will be much easier.

The imitation of Jesus in this area must not be misconstrued so that believers make excuses for sin, overlook sin or refuse to condemn it. The Savior prayed for His enemies, yet never compromised His message in the name of compassion. This example also does not conflict with the use of imprecatory prayers for the wicked. We pray that God would save even our adversaries. But, if that is not God’s will, we also pray that God would subdue the enemies of the church. Our great Mediator rules over men either by changing their hearts or by crushing them in His vengeance. As Calvin notes, “For when Christ was moved by a feeling of compassion to ask forgiveness from God for his persecutors, this did not hinder him from acquiescing in the righteous judgment of God, which he knew to be ordained for reprobate and obstinate men.”

We can pray like our Lord only because we trust in His sovereign power and perfect justice.

The Parting of the Garments

All of the gospels mention the soldiers’ division of Jesus’ clothing (Mt. 27:35-36; Mk. 15:24; Lk. 23:34; Jn. 19:23-24). The synoptic gospels are very brief and do not give any detailed account of the soldiers’ actions. They basically paraphrase the words of Psalm 22:18 (which no doubt was their reason for inscripturating this event) that the soldiers divided the clothes, casting lots. The apostle John, an eyewitness of this event, gives a fuller testimony. He writes, “Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece. They said therefore among themselves, ‘Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be,’ that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says: ‘They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.’ Therefore the soldiers did these things” (19:23-24).

It was the practice of the Romans to crucify the condemned naked. According to Roman law the possessions of the person executed became the property of the execution squad. Therefore, when the soldiers were finished crucifying our Lord, they proceeded to do what they probably always did at this time. They began dividing the spoil in a manner that all the soldiers

538 Ibid, 2:468.
540 “The division of the crucifixion victim’s property, including his clothing was apparently customary (Digest of Justinian 48.20.1; Tacitus, Ann. 6.29: ‘people sentenced to death forfeited their property’)…” (Craig A. Evans, Mark 8:27-16:20, 502).
would consider to be fair to each. Although the synoptic gospels’ abbreviated account gives the impression that lots were drawn for each piece of clothing, John’s more detailed description implies that it was only the seamless inner garment (chiton). During the days of our Lord Jewish men normally wore five pieces of clothing: sandals, head gear (for protection from the intense Middle Eastern sun), belt (girdle), outer garment (robe) and an inner garment (tunic).

Apparently the four soldiers of the execution squad came to an amiable agreement as to how to divide four of the items. The idea that these items were torn in pieces to make a fair division is unnecessary and unlikely.

The fifth item, the seamless tunic, was left over and was too valuable to cut into four pieces. Therefore, the soldiers decided to cast lots for it. We do not know just how the soldiers cast lots. Some commentators believe the soldiers used a form of dice for gambling while on duty. Lenski thinks that in “the case of the valuable tunic of Jesus three lots would be blank, and the other would be marked to win.” The soldiers would either reach into a helmet to grab their lot or the helmet would be shaken in turn until a lot fell out.

The removal of Christ’s clothes and the casting of lots over the division of the tunic are significant for two reasons. First, this event which appeared to be inconsequential and purely circumstantial was an explicit fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. That is one reason why all the gospels mention this incident and John’s account even quotes the appropriate passage. There was a conviction among the evangelists that the Scriptures were inspired by God and that these Scriptures testified of the Messiah, especially the specific prophecies. The fulfillment of these prophecies is very important (especially to the Jews) because they prove beyond a shadow of doubt that Jesus is the Christ.

The apostles and evangelists who wrote the New Testament took great care in recording every prophecy as it found fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth for a number of important reasons. For one, it was conclusive proof of the divine inspiration of the prophets who spoke and wrote these prophecies. Consequently T. H. Horne was compelled to assert, “The book which contains these predictions is stamped with the seal of heaven: a rich vein of evidence runs through the volume of the OT; the Bible is true; infidelity is confounded for ever; and we may address its patrons in the language of Saint Paul, ‘Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish!’”

The main purpose (which is intimately connected to the previous one) was apologetic in relation to the Messiah. The Bible, both in its general outline and its specific details, point us to Jesus as the Messianic King, Savior, Son of God and Judge of all mankind. The coming Messiah was the main trunk of the prophetic tree. Even the branches of the tree relate to the main trunk in some sense. Thus, at the very end of the New Testament canon we read, “Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10). Thus, it was very important that each and every fulfillment be recorded in the Scriptures of the New Testament as a cumulative testimony of Christ.

If we look at only one or two remarkable fulfillments of detailed predictions we are impressed. The adversaries of the faith and skeptics, however, may look at a few fulfillments as no more than an interesting coincidence. But when we examine the whole or complete picture of

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541 The idea of five separate items raises the problem of the turban or head gear and the crown of thorns. If Jesus wore the crown of thorns to the cross what happened to the head gear? It may be that the head gear was carried by one of the soldiers to Golgotha with the intention of dividing it with the other garments. If the head gear was not present there is the possibility that lots were used for all the items; Mark 15:24 may imply this.


Christ and prophetic fulfillment we must stand in awe of the perfection of the Bible and bow the knee to Christ as the literal fulfillment of “three hundred thirty-two distinct prophecies in the Old Testament.”

“Hence to use the words of Bishop Hurd, ‘though the evidence be but small from the completion of any one prophecy, taken separately, the amount of the whole evidence, resulting from the great number of prophecies, all relative to the same design may be considerable: like many scattered rays, which, though each be weak in itself, yet concentrated into one point, shall form a strong light, and strike the sense very powerfully.’”

Thus the Savior Himself, after the resurrection, used the fulfillment of Scripture to bolster the faith of the doubting disciples. “Then He said to them, ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me’” (Lk. 24:44). “And now I have told you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe” (Jn. 14:29). “The use and intent of prophecy, then, was to raise expectation, and to soothe the mind with hope—to maintain the faith of a particular providence, and the assurance of the Redeemer promised, and particularly to attest the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.”

Another purpose of prophecy that is neglected in our day is to motivate the people of God to a greater holiness. After speaking of the final day of the Lord when Jesus will return and “the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat,” Peter writes, “Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness…” (2 Pet. 3:11). “Some [prophecies], were aids to devotion and ritual observance: the fulfillment of Nahum’s predictions against Nineveh was designed to promote the keeping of feasts and the performance of vows (Nah. 1:15). Some, if not most, were aids to moral living. Both the promises of divine blessing and the threats of impending judgment constituted urgent motivations to ethical conduct.”

Contrary to popular opinion the object of prophecy is not to entertain and excite the masses with some new theory or fantasy regarding the end times, but rather to stimulate our faith in Christ and spur us to a more fervent service to Him and His kingdom. As John tells us in the book of Revelation, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near” (1:3). If one does not find the Redeemer in prophecy, believe in Him and bow the knee to Him as King, then one’s study of prophecy is worthless.

The gospel writers focus on the fulfillments of prophecy during the crucifixion to prove certain things. (1) God was in control of these events. They were planned and carried out according to the Father’s sovereign will. (2) The Old Testament Scriptures, which are the very Word of God, find their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. (3) The prophecies testify to the reality of all the claims of Christ. He is most certainly the Son of God, the Messiah, and the King of Israel. The rejection of the Savior and the gospel is not rooted in a lack of evidence, but rather is founded upon ethical autonomy and depravity.

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544 Cannon Liddon as quoted in William Hendriksen, The Gospel of John, 430. J. Barton Payne in his Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy lists only one hundred and thirteen distinct O. T. prophecies concerning Christ (667-668). His list, however, is very conservative and leaves out a number of prophecies in the Psalms (e.g., 69). Interestingly, a number of Jewish scholars who went to the Old Testament Scriptures to disprove Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah became dedicated Bible-believing Christians (e.g., Alfred Edersheim).


546 T. H. Horne as quoted by J. Barton Payne, 16.

Second, the removal of the Redeemer’s clothes so that He could be crucified naked was significant as an aspect of His humiliation. “The heathen take our Lord’s garments from Him and distribute the booty among themselves. In this act we not only observe the great shame and humiliation of being executed publicly without any clothes but also the suffering King must watch as His garments are divided as spoil. The Savior appears both humiliated and conquered. The shame of nakedness is fitted into the framework of Christ’s whole Suretyship. This shame of nakedness constitutes punishment.”548 After Adam had violated God’s law-Word he associated his nakedness with a feeling of guilt. This sense of guilt brought fear in relation to God. Thus, Adam struggled to hide his sin and nakedness from Jehovah, for his guilt brought on the sense of impending judgment (Gen. 3:8-11).

Nakedness, in fact will become a sign of shame associated with the exposing of sin and the degradation of judgment throughout Scripture. In the parable of Oholah (Israel) and Oholibah (Judah) Jehovah tells Ezekiel, “They [the Assyrians] uncovered her nakedness, took away her sons and daughters, and slew her with the sword; she became a by-word among women, for they had executed judgment on her” (23:10; cf. v. 29). Similarly Isaiah writes, “Your [nakedness] shall be uncovered, yes, your shame will be seen; I will take vengeance, and I will not arbitrate with a man” (47:3). Also, God warned Israel through Hosea saying, “Let her put away her harlotries from her sight…. Lest I strip her naked and expose her, as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness…” (2:2, 3; cf. Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 16:36-39; Am. 2:16; 2 Chron. 28:15; Mic. 1:9, 11).

The first Adam, knowing His guilt, attempted to conceal himself before God. The second Adam could not hide Himself for He was hanging on the cross exposed to the jeers and mocking of the world and the satanic hosts. In order to undo what the first Adam had done, it was necessary for the Son to die naked in order to endure the shame of judgment and the suffering of hell. “For the curse is descending upon Him. Now we know that the expressions of shame, also in their bodily manifestations, await the accursed after death…. [T]he disrobing of the Savior…was a part of the shame of hell.”549 It was a shameful, humiliating punishment for the sinless Messiah to be made a naked, bloody exhibition of the curse and judgment. Ironically, God could put a covering on the first Adam “only because he would one day take it off the second Adam.”550 For Adam clothing represented the grace of the Mediator to come. For Christ the absence of clothing was part of the curse.

In the stripping of Jesus as an act of judgment, we observe another aspect of our Lord’s substitutionary work. The Savior was treated as a guilty sinner; stripped naked as an accursed lawbreaker; and set apart for the shame of judgment and the curse of hell. This was all done so that our sins would be cleansed and we could be clothed with the spotless garment of His perfect righteousness. He was stripped on the precipice of hell as one abandoned by God and lost forever in order that we might be forgiven, accepted and adopted into God’s family forever. What a blessed salvation! The Savior did all this so that we would “not stand naked before God on the last day. It was done so that we, who are all defiled with sin, might have a wedding garment to

548 Klaas Schilder, Christ Crucified, 172. “The shame of nakedness came in with sin. He therefore who was made sin for us bore that shame, to roll away our reproach. He was stripped, that we might be clothed with white raiment (Rev. iii. 18), and that when we are unclothed we may not be found naked” (Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1198).
549 Ibid, 170.
550 Ibid, 172.
wear as we sit down by the side of the angels, and not be ashamed.”

“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift” (2 Cor. 9:15)!

The stripping of Jesus at the cross is the culmination of the laying aside of His glory at the incarnation. In these final hours Christ’s last possessions are taken from Him and He faces the wrath of God with nothing but His naked, bleeding Self. The glories of the throne room of Jehovah are in the distant past as He gives Himself to the death of the cross.

The Savior Mocked and Blasphemed

And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth. (Mt. 27:39-44; cf. Mk. 15:29-32; Lk. 23:35-39)

After the soldiers divide Jesus’ garments, the synoptic gospels focus their attention on the taunting of Christ on the cross. This will be that last indignity from men before His death. Like the division of the garments, this section is a direct fulfillment of Psalm 22. “All those who see Me ridicule Me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head saying, ‘He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him, since He delights in Him’” (v. 7). As we study the aspects of this public humiliation, we will consider: (1) the persons involved in the mockery; and (2) the nature of the mockery itself.

(1) The gospels emphasize that our Lord was hated and mocked by the whole of Jewish society and even the Roman soldiers as He suffered on Golgotha. The synoptics identify four different groups of people.

First, there are the ordinary people of Jerusalem (Lk. 23:35, “the people stood beholding”) or “those who passed by” (Mt. 27:39; Mk. 15:19). The Redeemer was crucified near the city by a major road (Jn. 19:20). Therefore, the expression “those who passed by” refers not merely to travelers who happened to be on the road when the crucifixion took place, but also to the crowds from Jerusalem who gathered to watch this spectacle. The people walked back and forth before the suffering Savior to express their contempt for Him while He was in agony.

Second, there are the rulers (Lk. 23:35) or the Sanhedrin establishment as a whole: the chief priests with the scribes and elders (Mt. 27:41; cf. Mk. 15:31). It was not enough for the Jewish leaders to falsely accuse and condemn the Messiah. They went out to Golgotha to revel in their triumph and mock their enemy as He writhes in pain. The rulers, “forgetting their high station and rank, joined the ribald crew in mocking Jesus in his death pangs. Every word was emphatic; every syllable cut and pierced our Lord to the heart.”

The leaders of the people had such a hatred and contempt for Christ that, unlike the people of Jerusalem who address the Redeemer directly (the common people use the second person singular [Mt. 27:39, 40]), they never directly address Jesus. In Matthew, Mark and Luke the leaders “talk about him to each

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other. They never talk to him. So thoroughly do they hate him."

Third, there are the robbers who join the crowd in deriding Christ (Mt. 27:44; Mk. 15:32; Lk. 23:39). From the leaders, to the common people, to even the criminals the Lord is ridiculed. The word used (oneidizon) means to insult (cf. Mt. 5:11), reproach (cf. Mt. 11:20), rebuke (cf. Mk. 16:14), revile (cf. Lk. 6:22) or find fault with. The Savior was rejected and hated by all classes in Israel. The rejection of the Mediator extended to every aspect of Jewish society. Truly, “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (Jn. 1:11). Our Lord died utterly alone, without any comfort by friends or consolation from angels. As Isaiah says, “He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him: He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (53:2-3). This is a sad and tragic picture. “The servant dwelt in the midst of His own people, and behind his physical form the eye of faith should have seen the true glory; but looking upon his outward appearance, Israel found nothing to delight its eye.”

Fourth, Luke records the fact that even the Roman soldiers, the execution squad, joined in the attacks upon the Redeemer. “The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, and saying, ‘If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself’” (23:36-37). The soldiers likely knew little if anything about Jesus of Nazareth; yet, they appear to have been caught up in the jeering spirit of the crowd. “The soldiers, rather from the natural inclinations of persons of their profession to join in any popular excitement and clamor, than from deep feelings of hatred, like that which rankled in the bosom of the priests and rulers, left their previously composed demeanor, and approached Jesus, pretending to share with Him their stimulating drink.” The vinegar offered in jest was not the sour wine mingled with gall mentioned earlier, nor was it the vine gar offered during the final moments of the three hours of darkness (Jn. 19:29-30). (Wine vinegar was the ordinary drink of soldiers, laborers and everyday people at this time. It was mixed with water and had very negligible alcohol content.) “The mocking that preceded and followed this (23:36a, 37) suggests Luke says this as a negative gesture.”

The extent of the mocking and hatred of Jesus teaches a number of things by way of application. a) It teaches that total depravity and the hatred of God extend to all classes of men. The innate pollution of sin that all men inherit from Adam is universal. Because of the evil within man there is a continual suppression of the truth regarding God. This sad reality is ultimately why the crowd so “naturally” mocked and laughed at the dying Savior. The idea that is common in our day that man is born naturally good, or that he is a blank slate is contrary to Scripture and human experience. The sinless Son of God, whom the angels adored with veiled faces, is treated by fallen man as the scum of the earth.

b) The hatred and mockery of the Redeemer is an expression of unbelief. There can be no neutrality when it comes to one’s opinion of the Messiah. Unbelief seeks to justify itself by attacking the truth. People who are wedded to their sins and do not want to repent lash out against Truth incarnate. Unbelief requires the development of an anti-Christian worldview in order to suppress the truth. This evil crowd, which is frothing at the mouth in anger toward the

Mediator, is a fitting picture of the unbelieving world. When we tell people about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must be prepared for an attack on the gospel as well as upon ourselves.

c) The mockery of the crowd is part of the extreme abasement of the Son of God. Our Lord endured the cruelest of all tortures when He was surrounded by the reviling, upbraiding and blaspheming of His covenant people. The Old Testament comes to an end with the greatest of unfaithfulness. God sends His only Son to Israel and the covenant nation treats Him with harsh persecution unto death.

(2) The nature of the mockery of Jesus can be seen in the gestures of the people, the biblical words used to describe their behavior and their statements made to Christ or to each other. Mark and Matthew describe the people wagging their heads in contempt of the Redeemer. The people were shaking their heads back and forth in a scornful, disapproving manner. Their gesture signifies their hatred of His person and their triumph over His destruction. It is an explicit fulfillment of the derision heaped upon the poor—righteous sufferers in the Psalms (Ps. 22:7; 109:25)—and calls to mind the reviling of Jerusalem in her hour of abject humiliation (Lam. 2:15; cf. Jer. 18:16).\footnote{See William Lane, \textit{The Gospel of Mark}, 569.} Further, the verb (\textit{echemukterizein}) translated as “they sneered” or “they scoffed” means literally “they turned up their noses at him.”\footnote{See Ralph Earle, \textit{Word Meanings in the New Testament}, 71. William Hendriksen, \textit{The Gospel of Matthew}, 967.} This means that the rulers were exulting in their perceived superiority over the Savior. These men were very arrogant and were saturated with self-righteousness and the love of raw power. Their wicked gestures toward God’s Son reflected their darkened, perverted hearts.

The biblical words used to describe the verbal torment of Jesus are very strong. All the synoptic gospels say that our Lord was mocked (Mt. 27:41; Mk. 15:31; Lk. 23:36). “The word for mocking (\textit{empaizontes, en} and \textit{paizo, from pais child}) means acting like immature children who are making fun of each other.”\footnote{See A. T. Robertson, \textit{Word Pictures in the New Testament}, 1:232.} The mocking of Christ is nothing less than verbal violence. The intent is to humiliate the Savior and cause Him as much emotional pain as possible.

The other word used (\textit{eblasphe mou n}) Mk. 15:29; Mt. 27:39) translated as blasphemed or reviled can have a lower sense of railing or reviling or a higher sense of blaspheming when used against God. In the case of the Mediator, it refers to both in that the leaders and the people did not believe that Jesus was divine. They were reviling Him and their reviling was blasphemous because they were speaking against God. They were mocking God in the person of His own Son. Their hatred of the Messiah, expressed by their blatant and repeated verbal abuse of Him, reflects their hatred and rejection of the covenant God of Israel. The best barometer of how a person regards God is to examine his attitude toward Christ. If a person does not believe in the Mediator, but rather rejects, mocks and abuses His holy name, then that person is an unbeliever who hates God. The modern pluralistic notion that Judaism and Islam worship the same God as Bible-believing Christians is completely untrue. Christ and the Father are One (Jn. 10:30, 38). “He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son” (1 Jn. 5:10).

The mockery of Jesus comes in three episodes. In the first incident our Lord is mocked by the false accusation that He claimed He could destroy and rebuild the temple in three days. Our Lord’s statement about His resurrection had been misconstrued and perverted at His trial and this slanderous misinterpretation had alienated a large part of the population of Jerusalem. Therefore, the populace joins the false witnesses (Mt. 26:60, 61) and the corrupt Sanhedrin in...
their contempt of the Messiah. “Perhaps the most painful part of ridicule is to have one’s most solemn sayings turned to scorn, as were our Lord’s words about the temple of His body.”

In Mark’s account the mockery begins with the word “ah” (Greek, oua), “a sort of applauding acclamation (like huzza or bravo) used in ancient games, and here applied ironically to our Lord, as one who had promised or threatened more than he was able to perform.” The people were treating the crucifixion of the Son of God as a sporting event, an entertaining spectacle. The jeering of the crowd was all part of the demonic “fun” and “excitement.”

The mocking regarding the destruction and rebuilding of the temple is connected to a demand for Jesus to save Himself. To paraphrase, “You are a great miracle worker. You even claimed that You could destroy this temple and rebuild it in three days. Well then, save yourself by coming down from the cross and do it. Go prove yourself, then we will believe in You.” The mocking idea behind this is, “if you promised to do something so big and dramatic, then why can’t you do something so small as come down from the cross?” “[T]he one who talked so big is now able to do nothing for Himself.”

With no proper understanding of the necessity for the Messiah to suffer and die for the sins of His people, the cross is the great stumbling block to the Jews. They saw this helplessness and utter abandonment by God as proof that the Nazarene was an imposter. They saw it as totally inconsistent with the power of the Messiah.

In Matthew’s account the people say, “If You are the Son of God come down from the cross.” This indicates that the proceedings of the Sanhedrin and the trial before Pilate (Jn. 18:7) had made public the Savior’s claim that He was God’s Son. Thus, the mockery of the crowd reveals that they saw the Nazarene as a false Messiah, an imposter, a charlatan. If this dying Galilean is truly the Son of God and can do amazing miracles, then certainly He can save Himself. Interestingly, the phrase, “if you are the Son of God” echoes verbatim the repeated clause in the temptation narrative (cf. 4:3, 6) as well as the question of the high priest (26:63).

Behind the mockery lies a temptation from Satan. Ironically, it is precisely because Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God that He cannot come down from the cross and save Himself. To do so would violate His Father’s will, destroy His mission and doom His beloved people.

Little did the blasphemers realize that the pain, humiliation and curse of the cross had to be endured to the full if the Mediator was to conquer sin, death and hell and sit on His throne of glory. The wicked crowd engaged in a premature victory. In only three days as the Savior had promised, His crucified, dead and buried body would arise from its destruction victorious. The demonic mob acted as the tempter in the garden who demanded that Eve go for God’s blessing in her own way and own time. We must submit to God’s Word and learn to “allow God to conceal His power, whenever it pleases Him to do so, that he may afterwards display it at his pleasure at the proper time and place.”

The members of the Sanhedrin who attended the crucifixion pick up on the taunts of the crowd and begin to mock the Savior with challenges that presuppose that His mission was a complete failure. The same men who made a mockery of justice at the ecclesiastical trial and

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561 J. A. Alexander, Mark, 423. “The contemptuous challenge for Jesus to rescue himself and come down from the cross is intelligible in the light of an early Jewish dictum preserved in Midrash Tannaim III.23: ‘Before a man puts his trust in flesh and blood, (i.e. another man) and asks him to save him, let him (i.e. the other) save himself from death’” (William Lane, The Gospel of Mark, 569).
inflamed the crowd against Jesus at the Pavement were now gloating in triumph. As we examine the mockery of the leaders, we must keep in mind that their statements are not made directly to Christ. The Jewish authorities are speaking to each other. Mark says, “Likewise the chief priests also mocking among themselves with the scribes said…” (15:31); they, however, were indirectly addressing Jesus and the crowd. On the one hand, they wanted these words to pierce their enemy in the heart. They wanted to hurt the Savior as much as possible (cf. Lk. 23:35). “They cannot spit on him and strike him but they can certainly wound him with their cowardly and insulting tongues.” On the other hand, they were speaking with the full intention of being heard by and influencing the motley crowd. At one time the Redeemer had been popular with the people. The leaders had envied the Lord regarding this and previously they had been afraid that they were losing their grip on the people. But now with the events of Friday morning, the populace had thoroughly taken sides with the Jewish authorities. Therefore, in their mockery of the Messiah they were setting forth their reasons why the Nazarene could not be the Messiah, the King of Israel. They were cementing their ungodly, unbelieving relationship with the people.

There are two separate taunts or mocking challenges made before the people and Christ by the religious establishment. The first challenges our Lord’s claim to be the Messianic King. The second was His claim to be the Son of God. Each verbal taunt will be considered in turn.

The chief priests, with the scribes and elders sneered at Jesus (Lk. 23:35) as they said to each other, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him.” Luke’s account tells us that our Lord’s Messianic Kingship was being challenged. He adds, “Let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God” (Lk. 23:35). There are a number of things to note regarding the Jewish leadership’s mockery.

First, what do the leaders mean by the word save (Greek, sozo)? The leaders are referring here to the Lord’s many works of healing throughout Israel. While the statement “He saved others” seems to be an admission that Jesus had the ability to heal the sick, blind, deaf, and lame (cf. Mt. 9:21-22), the following statement is meant to call those healings into question: “Himself He cannot save.” They are speaking sarcastically. They are using His crucifixion and helplessness as a reason to call into question His whole ministry. The general gist of what they are implying is: “If this man cannot even preserve his own life, then can we really trust in all the so-called miracles?” Earlier, the religious establishment had ascribed His power to perform miracles to the devil (Mt. 9:34; cf. 10:25, 12:24). Perhaps, the members of the Sanhedrin are making the argument that since His works were accomplished through sorcery, God cannot come to His aid. He cannot be saved from death. The leaders want the people to interpret the ministry of Christ in light of what they regard as the massive failure of the crucifixion. The miracles, which had made the Mediator very popular and sought after, must be viewed (according to the Sanhedrin) as either spurious, demonic or both.

Second, because of their unbelief, they presuppose that Jesus cannot save Himself. They assume that if the Nazarene had the power to save Himself, then He most certainly would. If they believed in the Mediator, yet did not understand the importance and meaning to the crucifixion, they would have reasoned: “He saved others. He can save Himself if He wants to. Therefore, there must be a good reason as to why He refuses to save Himself that I do not yet understand. Therefore, I need to go back to the sacred Scriptures and specifically look for passages that speak of a suffering Messiah. Obviously, the problem is not with Jesus, or with Scripture, but my own ignorance.”

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The total blindness of the Jewish nation (including the Lord’s own disciples) on the necessity and purpose of the Messiah’s suffering is truly astounding. The sufferings and bloody death of the Mediator is clearly typified in the Old Testament sacrifices. The vicarious sufferings of the Redeemer and His glorious victory are repeatedly set forth in the Psalms (e.g., 2, 8, 16, 22, 40, 45, 69, 72, 110). They reveal His divinity (Ps. 45:6; 110), eternal sonship (Ps. 2:7), incarnation (Ps. 8:5), mediatorial offices (prophet, Ps. 40:9-10; 22:22; priest, Ps. 110:4; king, Ps. 45:6) His betrayal (Ps. 41:9), agony in the garden (Ps. 22:2), trial (Ps. 22:6; 118:22), rejection (Ps. 22:6; 118:22), crucifixion (Ps. 22; 69), burial and resurrection (Ps. 16:9-11) and ascension (Ps. 47:5). The sufferings of Emmanuel are also plainly foretold in the prophets (e.g., Isa. 53; Dan. 9). Yet, the Jewish religious scholars, teachers and leaders did not have any discernable knowledge regarding this aspect of the Messiah’s ministry. “The idea of Messiah ‘saving others’ by His own death seems never to have entered into their minds. The words before us are striking proof of the blindness of the rulers.”

Third, this mocking by the Sanhedrin contains a very clever, satanically inspired temptation of Christ. In one sense, Jesus obviously could deliver Himself from the cross. The Mediator is God and could tear the earth in two if He so desired. Further, there was nothing external to God that forced Him to send His Son to the cross. The choice of the Mediator to go to the cross was not determined by any external necessity. God could have justly left the whole human race to perish in their sins if He so desired.

But because of “the good pleasure of His will” (Eph. 1:5) and the decision by the triune God to save a people from their sins (the covenant of redemption) there is a sense in which the Savior could not save Himself. Our Lord could not save Himself because: a) His death on the cross was the only possible way that God could save sinners (cf. Heb. 9:22; 10:4, 11-14; Jn. 10:9; 14:6; Ac. 4:12). b) The Son had promised perfectly to carry out the will of His Father and it is impossible for the Son of God to disobey that will. “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Mt. 26:39; cf. Jn. 5:30, 36; Heb. 10:7). c) God decreed the death of Christ and prophesied that it would take place. Therefore, it must take place. “And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mk. 8:31; cf. Lk. 9:22; 24:7), “But first, He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation” (Lk. 17:25; cf. Jn. 3:14; 12:34; Ac. 17:3).

Consequently, the challenge of the Jewish leaders for the Nazarene to prove Himself by coming down from the cross was a temptation to disobey the will of God, overturn the prophetic Scriptures and leave the whole body of the elect to perish in their sins. Calvin writes, Wicked men demand from Christ such a proof of his power that, by proving himself to be the Son of God, he may cease to be the Son of God. He had clothed himself with human flesh, and had descended into the world, on this condition, that, by the sacrifice of his death, he might reconcile men to God the Father. So then, in order to prove himself to be the Son of God, it was necessary that he should hang on the cross. And now those wicked men affirm that the Redeemer will not be recognized as the Son of God, unless he comes down from the cross, and thus disobey the command of his Father, and, leaving incomplete the expiation of sins, divest himself of the office which God had assigned to him. But let us learn from it to confirm our faith by considering that the Son of God determined to remain nailed to the cross for the sake of

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our salvation, until he had endured most cruel torments of the flesh, and dreadful anguish of soul, and even death itself.\textsuperscript{567}

Fourth, the Sanhedrin’s demand for faith or belief only based on sight or empirical proof is a denial of one of the central features of biblical faith. The author of Hebrews writes, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (11:1). Faith believes the testimony of God’s Word and does not demand or order God to prove Himself. Faith is convinced of the truth or reality of what God says or promises without empirical evidence. The religious leaders had so neglected God’s Word and externalized their religion with human traditions that they trusted their own logic and senses more than Scripture. We must remember our Lord’s words to Thomas which are a lesson both to him and Christians of every age. “Thomas because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn. 20:29). “What a precious word is this for our hearts. We have never seen Him in the flesh. Here then is a promise for us.”\textsuperscript{568} The Lord has given us His infallible Word which teaches us about the words, deeds, sacrifice and resurrection of the Savior that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we may have life in His name (Jn. 20:31). “Whoever at any time, past, present or future, believes without seeing is pronounced ‘blessed’ in the soteriological sense.”\textsuperscript{569} It is interesting that our Lord never appeared to unbelievers or non-disciples after His resurrection (with one exception, His confrontation with and special calling of Saul on the road to Damascus, Acts 9:3-6). The Mediator appeared to Thomas to help a disciple with weak faith in one particular area. He did not appear to rank unbelieving skeptics to satisfy their curiosity.

In our day when secular humanism, skepticism and atheistic naturalism reign supreme in the courts, capitals, state schools and universities we see the same type of mockery of Christ as that of the Jewish establishment. People say that they cannot believe in Jesus or the claims of the Bible without first proving such things by a scientific methodology. The Redeemer must first be proved by the senses, by empirical research or demonstrated by human reason. These people will assert: “Why should I believe what the Bible says about the Son of God without independent proof from scientific research?” Consequently, many people today mock the claims of the Messiah and use such arguments as a foundation of unbelief. Thus, universities today are centers of infidelity where most young people neglect the true Christian religion and indulge themselves in all sorts of debauchery. How is the Bible-believing Christian supposed to respond to such common objections to the faith? There are a number of things that believers can say to refute such unbelieving skepticism.

a) It is disingenuous for people to demand proof of Christ’s claims as if Jesus were a rock that could be dug up and studied by scientists. The evidence for the truth claims of Scripture must obviously be different than the evidence for the mineral content of topsoil. The Bible’s teaching regarding the Redeemer is theological, historical, spiritual and related to prophecy. Therefore, it is foolish and absurd to treat this topic in a simple, materialistic manner. Although the sacred Scriptures are unique because they come from God (who is truth itself) and, therefore, must be received by faith as the Word of God; nevertheless, there is abundant testimony that the Bible is exactly what it claims to be. There is the perfect fulfillment of prophecy; the logical consistency of every part of Scripture; the teaching on the only way of salvation (which is the

\textsuperscript{568} Arthur W. Pink, \textit{Exposition of John}, 3:301.
\textsuperscript{569} R. C. H. Lenski, \textit{The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel}, 1392.
only way revealed to man that is consistent with God’s nature and man’s predicament; the full purpose of Scripture which gives all glory to God; the findings of archeology (which when interpreted correctly are always consistent with biblical history); “[a]nd the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style…the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof” (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:5). The only reason that people do not believe is because they are suppressing the truth about God. The bottom line is that they do not want to repent. Consequently, they are imposing their unbelieving presuppositions on the evidence.

Like the Jewish establishment, their demands for proof are not really sincere. They are not reasonable requests, but rather feeble excuses for unbelief. Had not the Lord already repeatedly proved His claims before the nation by His amazing signs and miracles? But, the religious leaders rejected such indisputable proof because they filtered what they saw through their unbelieving, sinful presuppositions. Therefore, the miracles which were seen by all became for them, not evidence of His messianic kingship, but rather evidence that He was a sorcerer who did works by Satan’s power. Unbelieving man has an axe to grind against God and His beloved Son. While the secular humanist proclaims himself the champion of reason and objectivity, he is in fact a slave of his own anti-Christian, anti-God presuppositions. He chooses his “data” and his “facts” according to his naturalistic, atheistic presuppositions. The infinite, personal God of the Bible is a priori (i.e. before the facts) ruled out of bounds.

b) People are hypocritical when they demand physical-empirical proof for the claims of Christ because people and even secular scientists believe in many things they have never and can never see. How many scientists have observed macro-evolution take place? How many astronomers have seen a black hole or a quasar? Yet, such things are accepted virtually as facts in the scientific community. How many historians have seen the battle of Waterloo or the conquests of Alexander the Great? Yet, does any competent historian doubt the reality of those historical events? If secular scientists, believe in absurd, irrational and non-provable theories regarding evolution and physics because they place their faith in the axioms of certain finite, fallible men (e.g., Charles Darwin), then why do they ridicule Christians for accepting as true the infallible Word of God?

In the Bible we are never asked to believe in anything contrary to evidence or reason. Christianity does not teach a blind, unreasoning faith, as if belief were a blind leap in the dark. On the contrary, the true biblical religion is the only worldview that can account for logic, true science, ethics, love, justice and meaning. Modern secular naturalists are the ones who begin with axioms and postulates that are irrational faith commitments. They believe that matter plus time plus chance can organize itself into planets and amazingly complex organisms. Such a view is not only ludicrous, but renders all human intellectual thought as no more than electro-chemical responses. Men are no more than complex machines and all love, meaning and thought are merely epiphenomena. In such a system man has no more significance than pond scum. Why does unbelieving man commit himself to such absurd theories that are contrary to all evidence? He does so because he rejects the only logical alternative. He does not want to repent of his sins and bow the knee to Jesus, the Son of God and messianic King.

Given the natural man’s fallen state and his innate hostility to the God of the Bible and spiritual truth, there is a sense in which belief must precede understanding. When the Holy Spirit opens a man’s eyes spiritually and illuminates his mind to the truth, then the abundant proofs become clear to him. Consequently, modern unbelieving skeptics (just like the unbelieving Jews who mocked Jesus on the cross) demand proof only because they have already rejected proof.
Once we understand this, we will not become frustrated or angry when people we witness to repeatedly reject Christ for unreasonable, absurd and foolish reasons. Therefore, we must humbly and accurately speak the truth in love and pray that God would open their blind eyes and deaf ears.

Further, we must not be afraid to point out the non-Christian’s unbelieving hostile axioms, starting points or presuppositions. “Let us beware of the danger of following our own imaginations. A man may make one demand after another, till at last, nothing will satisfy him; and the next step is that he will not be content with what God shows him, he shall be left in darkness and perplexity.” The most vile and wicked reprobates will offer to believe upon such conditions as they themselves shall prescribe to God, as here these men do, but they who will not believe upon the grounds of faith offered to them, shall not have any such grounds as they would be at.571

The third mocking statement is found only in Matthew’s account which reads, “He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (27:43). There are a number of things to note regarding this taunt.

First, the Sanhedrin’s taunt is unwittingly almost identical to Psalm 22:8 (LXX 21:9). The Jewish leaders were so caught up in their contempt of Jesus they allowed themselves to become the fulfillment of the enemies of the Messiah prophesied by David: “He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him since He delights in Him.”

Second, this mockery is the most blasphemous of all and the sharpest, in that Christ’s Sonship and relationship with His Father is called into question. “Nothing, no nothing, was dearer to him than the relationship of intimacy between himself and the Father (Matt. 11:27; John 10:30; 16:32; 17:5, 24). And now these adversaries, by [unknowingly] alluding to the words of Ps. 22:8b, are implying that his heavenly Father has lost all interest in him, and that his trust in God is now futile.” Not understanding the necessity of the Messiah’s suffering and death, the Jewish leadership thinks they have proof that the Nazarene cannot be God’s Son. They assume that if Jesus really is the Son of God, then Jehovah would immediately deliver Him from His suffering. To the Sanhedrinists the cross of Christ proved that God did not delight in or favor Jesus at all. “The point of truth which the devil and reprobate men can least endure is the doctrine of the Godhead of Christ, which is the rock whereupon the elect are builded. Therefore, say they, he said I am the Son of God. This point among all did gall them most.”

Third, like the previous mockery, this taunt was a clever temptation of the devil. Satan is an expert at taking a biblical principle and twisting it to an unbiblical conclusion. It is a general principle of Scripture that people who trust in God can have confidence that Jehovah will deliver them. Note the words of the Psalmist: “Great deliverance He gives to His king, and shows mercy to His anointed.” (18:50). “The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them…. The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles…. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all” (37:7, 17, 19). Given these kinds of passages there is a sense in which this mockery appears to be very logical. The devil uses these promises and twists them and gives them a meaning never

570 Richard Cecil, as quoted in J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:470.
571 David Dickson, Matthew, 395.
572 William Hendriksen, The Gospel of Matthew, 967-968. “Surely these priests and scribes had forgotten their psalter, or they would not have used the same words, so exactly to answer the type and prophecy: but the scriptures must be fulfilled” (Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:427).
573 David Dickson, Matthew, 394.
intended by God; then aims them as fiery darts right at the suffering Savior’s soul. Thus, the Sanhedrinsts in conjunction with all the demons of hell are telling Jesus, “God does not love You. Your Father has failed You. Jehovah has forever forsaken You.”

This mockery of the devil seems plausible but contains three deadly perversions of Scripture. a) The mockery assumes that the reason for our Lord being forsaken is that He is a fraud who has a counterfeit faith. He is not God’s Son but a wicked sorcerer, a blasphemer. While it is true that Christ was forsaken by God on the cross, the Bible makes it very clear that the reason had absolutely nothing to do with His faith, person or character. The Mediator was forsaken because the sin of the elect was imputed to Him on the cross. Paul says, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). “For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sinful flesh: He condemned sin in the flesh.” (Rom. 8:3). “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). If the Sanhedrinsts knew and believed the Scriptures they would have understood that the suffering and death of Jesus was unique. The Father sent the Son into the world for the purpose of forsaking Him on the cross. God must turn away from His blessed, beloved Son because the Savior is the bearer of guilt, the sufferer who takes upon Himself the penalty for sin and the curse of hell itself.

What makes this mockery of Jesus so diabolical and painful was the fact that it was given as the Father was indeed abandoning His Son. Also, it contained an element of truth in that Christ would not immediately be delivered from this suffering unto death by God.

b) Another satanic aspect of this mockery regards the timing of the deliverance. The Sanhedrinsts emphasize the present, demanding an immediate deliverance. They said, “Let Him deliver Him now.” The implicit message behind this statement is that if deliverance is not instantaneous, then it will never, ever come. Satan asserts that if the Father does not save Christ now, then He will abandon Him forever. The religious leaders’ taunt reveals that they held a very man-centered concept of God. They viewed God as existing to meet man’s needs, when and where man wants his needs to be met. They apparently have no concept that God fulfills His promises according to His own sovereign timing and also does so in His own way. They had neglected the biblical teaching that Jehovah often places His own people in situations of suffering and tribulation for their own sanctification and benefit. We can rest assured that God watches over us, anticipates our spiritual and physical needs and only at certain times appears not to love us by withholding aid. God will indeed deliver us in His own good time and His own unique manner. We must submit to this truth and be assured of the love of God. People who demand instantaneous deliverance according to their own standard of justice, love and fairness do not know their Bible or understand God’s providence.

Christ’s perfect endurance of this diabolical temptation in the midst of intense physical and mental suffering sets the standard by which all believers must endure similar temptations. When believers endure suffering and hardship, the tempter will always hurl the accusation that God has abandoned us; that our faith was all for nothing; or, that our faith was always counterfeit; and, therefore, our prayers will never be heard. In these trying circumstances the devil says, “You see, all of your so-called faith and good works are for nothing. God has forsaken you. Therefore, stop wasting time following Christ and serving Him. Stop going to church. Go out and have fun. Live your life the way you want to, without regard for Jesus or the Bible.” Our Lord teaches us by example not to bow down to such devious arguments from Satan and the world. As Calvin says,
Satan, therefore, attempts to drive us to despair by this logic, that it is in vain for us to feel assured of the love of God, when we do not clearly perceive his aid. And as he suggests to our minds this kind of imposition, so he employs his agents, who contend that God has sold and abandoned our salvation, because he delays to give his assistance. We ought, therefore, to reject as false this argument, that God does not love those whom he appears for a time to forsake; and, indeed, nothing is more unreasonable than to limit his love to any point of time. God has, indeed, promised that he will be our Deliverer; but if he sometimes winks at our calamities, we ought patiently to endure the delay. It is, therefore, contrary to the nature of faith, that the word now should be insisted on by those whom God is training by the cross and by adversity to obedience, and whom he entreats to pray and to call on his name; for these are rather the testimonies of his fatherly love, as the apostle tells us, (Heb. xii. 6.)

Jesus endured this temptation and maintained His hope in God even though He knew He had to suffer and die because He knew that God would deliver Him from death at the resurrection. The objection of the mockers was exposed as unbelieving lies when the Savior walked out of the tomb with His glorified body. In fact the author of Hebrews tells us that God answered the prayers of the suffering Redeemer, that His hope in God was not in vain. Christ...“who in the days of His flesh, when He offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear.... And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (5:7, 9).

Let us learn from our Lord’s experience that God delivers in His own way, in His own time. If Jesus was tortured to death and yet was delivered by God, then we may rest and be content that God can and will deliver us from anything that the devil or this world throws our way. Spurgeon’s words about the deliverance of the only Begotten are applicable and very helpful. He writes,

Did the Father tear up the cross from the earth? Did he proceed to draw out the nails from the sacred hands and feet of his dear Son? Did he set him down upon that “green hill far away, beyond the city wall,” and place in his hand a sword of fire with which to smite his adversaries? Did he bid the earth open and swallow up all his foes? No; nothing of the kind. Jehovah did not interpose to spare his Son a single pang; but he let him die. He let him be taken as a dead man down from the cross and laid in a tomb. Jesus went through with his suffering to the bitter end. O brothers and sisters, this may be God’s way of delivering us. We have trusted in God that he would deliver us; and his rendering of his promise is, that he will enable us to go through with it; we shall suffer to the last, and triumph in so doing.

In times of severe trials we must believe that God’s method of deliverance is always what is best for us. In such circumstances we must learn to trust God with all our heart and not lean on our own understanding (Prov. 3:5). We must reject the taunts of Satan and his minions and take great comfort in the obedience of Christ during the mockery of the cross and the glorious way that God chose to deliver Him. God knows our pain during our severe trials. He promises to deliver us; but many times, for our own edification, He does so only after many difficulties and tears. “It is not God’s will that every mountain be leveled, but that we should be the stronger for

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climbing the Hill Difficulty. God will deliver; he must deliver, but he will do it our cases, as in
the case of our Lord, in the best possible manner."576

The Jewish leadership mocked Jesus to vilify Him as an imposter because they believed
He was more a sorcerer than a Savior. They wanted the people of Israel to spurn the Nazarene as
a deceiver. The Sanhedrinists also said everything they possibly could to cause pain and
suffering to the soul of the Redeemer. They were relishing their perceived victory. They were
laughing with the devil and all the satanic hosts. Simultaneously, they were tempting Jesus. They
were trying to shake His faith in God and bring Him to a state of despair and terror. But the
Messiah obeyed and endured. He suffered unto death with the knowledge that God would deliver
Him. “Salvation is from the LORD” (Jon. 2:9). Knowing that Jesus endured this mockery so that
we could be spared the eternal mockery and despair of hell we must place our faith in Him and
learn to endure suffering and temptation as He did.

Chapter 15: A Criminal Converted

And with him they crucify two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left...;
“Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” And
they that were crucified with him reviled him. (Mk. 15:27, 32)

Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the
left... “He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, ‘I am the
Son of God.”’ The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth. (Mt.
27:38, 43-44)

And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they
were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors,
one on the right hand, and the other on the left... And one of the malefactors which were
hanged railed on him, saying, “If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.” But the other answering
rebuked him, saying, “Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And
we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing
amiss.” And he said unto Jesus, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”
And Jesus said unto him, “Verily I say unto thee, ‘Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.’”
(Lk. 23:32, 33, 39-43)

Introduction

The story of the salvation of the crucified robber is one of the most amazing records of a
conversion in the whole Bible. J. C. Ryle writes, “The verses we have now read deserve to be
printed in letters of gold. They have probably been the salvation of myriads of souls. Multitudes
will thank God to all eternity that the Bible contains this story of the penitent thief.”577 This
section of Scripture is comforting and encouraging to lost sinners. It also greatly strengthens our
faith because it so explicitly teaches God’s sovereign power to save and Jesus’ willingness and
ability to save, even when He was in agony, dying on the cross. When Christ saved the wicked
robber, he was a spectacle of shame on the brink of death. Even while our Lord was near the

lowest point of His humiliation He achieved this amazing act of grace. If a simple trust in the Savior when He was emptied of all His glory and marred beyond recognition can save a wicked, murdering thief, then certainly our faith in the resurrected, glorified King who sits at the right hand of Power is sufficient to save.

As we study this section of Scripture there are four areas that merit our attention: (1) the character and condition of the robber before his conversion; (2) how this criminal was converted to Christ; (3) the evidences of this man’s faith and repentance; and (4) what we can learn from our Lord’s promise to the penitent thief. May God enable us to profit from this amazing section of Scripture.

The Criminal’s Character and Condition

As we study the conversion of the robber on the cross, it is important to note that, in God’s providence, this man was no ordinary, average, everyday sinner. This man, rather, was the vilest of the vile, the lowest of the low, and the bottom of the barrel of sinful, wretched humanity. Indeed, he was the scum of the earth who deserved to be put to death. This point is easily established if we look at the terms used to describe him in the gospels.

(1) The gospels of Matthew and Mark describe the two men crucified with Jesus as “thieves” (KJV) or “robbers” (NJKV, NASB, RSV, NIV). Although the KJV translates the Greek word used (lestes) as “thief,” the word “robber” is a better translation. We know this because the Greek word for thief is kleptes (thus the English word kleptomaniac) and the word “robber” is a more serious offense than being a thief. A robber, brigand or bandit is someone who is more than a petty thief. He is someone who operates as part of a group of wicked associates who use organized planning and violence to achieve their ends. A robber “would require an armed band to apprehend him.”\(^\text{578}\) Roman law even “distinguished between theft (furtum) and robbery (rapina, theft combined with violence).”\(^\text{579}\)

According to Roman scholars, theft and robbery were not capital crimes in the days when our Lord walked the earth. Therefore, the fact that the robbers received the death penalty can only be explained in one of two ways. Either these men were guilty of murder during the commission of their crimes, or the Greek word for robber has the sense of insurrectionist or revolutionary. “Josephus uses lestes for the Jews who were revolutionaries against the Roman government.”\(^\text{580}\) The consensus of modern commentators is that it is very likely that these two “robbers” were in fact violent revolutionaries who were seized in connection with the insurrection led by Barabbas (cf. Mk. 15:7). These men were Barabbas’ accomplices and were awaiting execution with him. When Barabbas was released by the Jews, the Messiah took his place in between these two wicked insurrectionists.

Whether or not the criminal on the cross was a violent revolutionary or a murderous brigand, we know that this man was thoroughly wicked and had absolutely no regard for human life. Both groups used violence to secure other people’s money and property and both used murder to accomplish their evil deeds. This robber would lie in wait for travelers. When innocent people came by, he would use violence to rob them and even kill them if necessary. He would leave the dead on the road to be eaten by the birds; the wounded would be left behind to bleed to death and agonize under the hot sun. He was a man without morals and without mercy. He is

\(^\text{580}\) Ibid, footnote 61.
accurately described in Proverbs 1:11-13: “Come with us, let us lie in wait to shed blood; let us lurk secretly for the innocent without cause; let us swallow them alive like Sheol, and whole, like those who go down to the Pit; we shall find all kind of possessions, we shall fill our houses with spoil.”

We can get an idea of how evil the robber on the cross was by the behavior of his comrades (the Zealots) during the Jewish war they provoked. Although they claimed to be nationalistic and religious, their tactics were lawless and barbaric. Soon after the outbreak of war, the Zealots took control of the temple area. They committed many murders, some within the temple itself. They allowed the worst of criminals to walk around in the Holy of Holies. They beat and murdered the strictest priests and even appointed their own lawless pretender, Phanni, as the high priest. “[I]n response to this action…the retired priest Ananus with tears lamented: ‘It would have been better for me to have died before I had seen the house of God laden with such abominations and its unapproachable and hallowed places crowded with the feet of murderers’ (Wars, 4:3:10).” This criminal on the cross was a heartless, cruel robber and murderer who had no regard for God or man.

(2) Luke uses a different word to describe these robbers. He refers to them as “malefactors” (KJV, malefactor is from the Latin) or “criminals” (NKJV). The Greek term kakourgos used is a compound word consisting of two words: kakos, “evil,” and ergon, “work.” Literally then, the robber was an “evil worker.” In context a good modern rendering would be “criminal.” Luke, writing to a predominantly Gentile audience, wants us to know that the men crucified with Christ were evil thugs. They were criminals who spent their time planning and committing evil deeds.

The law of God and the Roman state meant nothing to this man. He existed to please himself; he lived for the moment. There was no fear of God before his eyes. Everything existed to satisfy his lusts. His heart was a heart of stone; the loss of property, the injury to and even the death of innocent people did not prick this evil man’s conscience. He was a hardened, blood-thirsty, despicable criminal.

(3) But even worse than everything observed so far, he also was a blasphemer. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that this man was mocking Jesus before his conversion. When the unbelieving crowds were mocking our Lord’s helplessness by challenging Him to come down from the cross, both criminals joined in and mocked Him. “The rebels (v. 27) revile Jesus out of their fear and anguish. Their own hopes and aspirations have been foiled, so they reproach Jesus for having made even grander plans that seemingly have also gone unfulfilled.” The mockery of the robbers is in the imperfect tense, indicating that they joined in the derision for some time. In Matthew the robber is even mocking the Savior’s claim to be the Son of God (27:44). Before his conversion, the robber had a contempt and hatred for Christ. He was an avowed enemy of the Savior and all that He stood for, just like the mocking crowd. “The contempt shown for Jesus by those gathered about the cross may have encouraged the two others who were crucified to vent their rage upon him. In their eyes Jesus was a contemptible caricature of sovereignty, and they reproached him.” At this point in the story, it appears that the just punishments these robbers received only hardened them in their rebellion. Instead of repenting of their evil, they were

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581 For an excellent description of the lawless activities of the Zealots see: Gary DeMar, Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1999), 104, 105.
582 William L. Lane, The Gospel of Mark, 469.
583 Craig A. Evans, Mark 8:27-16:20, 506.
584 William L. Lane, The Gospel of Mark, 570.
adding new sins to their old. It looked as though both men would be fierce, impenitent and defiant to the bitter end. God, however, had a different plan.

Some scholars (e.g., Calvin, R. C. Trench) see an apparent contradiction between the account from Mark and Matthew where both brigands are said to be mocking Jesus and Luke which says “one of the criminals...railed on Him” (23:39). As a result they offer clever arguments as to why these evangelists do not actually disagree (e.g., Calvin says the plural robbers is a synecdoche [i.e. a figure of speech where the whole describes the part or the part describes the whole]—that Matthew and Mark are saying the Messiah was mocked by the class of robbers [i.e. the plural of the category]). Such argumentation is completely unnecessary because Luke is simply describing what occurred after both robbers were mocking the Lord. It is not a contradiction but an addition. Both Matthew and Mark state very clearly that both men reviled Christ. In the context it is obvious that they are not discussing the class of robbers or using a plural number to describe a transaction, but are speaking plainly that both criminals railed at first, but then, as Luke says, one criminal was enlightened by the Holy Spirit and repented.

(4) Note also that this robber was suffering the just consequences of his crimes. He was on the cross under the sentence of death from the civil magistrate and, even worse, under the sentence of eternal death from God. Suffering on the cross was, no doubt, a terrifying, excruciating way to die. But we must keep in mind that the penalty of hell is far more serious and terrifying than even the agony of crucifixion. Jesus warned us of this in Matthew 10:28: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Our Lord is saying that for those who do not know Him there is an everlasting future of suffering for both the soul and the body. There is no such thing as annihilation or the cessation of existence. But rather, those who reject the Savior will spend eternity in the place called “the pit of the abyss” (Isa. 14:15; Rev. 9:2), “the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15), “the second death” (Rev. 20:14; 21:8), “hell” (2 Pet. 2:4), “the outer darkness” (Mt. 25:30; Jude 1:13). Those who do not believe in Jesus will suffer: “everlasting punishment” (Mt. 25:46); “everlasting fire” (Mt. 18:8); “everlasting destruction” (2 Th. 1:9); “eternal fire” (Mt. 13:40-42; Rev. 14:10; Jude 7); “torment” (basanos) or torture (Lk. 16:23-24; Mt. 24:50-51) where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 24:51). If this robber did not repent and look to the divine-human Mediator, he would have gone immediately to hell upon death and suffered the “resurrection of condemnation” (Jn. 5:29).

This condemned robber, hanging on the cross of execution, is a graphic picture of everyone who has not embraced the Lord Jesus Christ by faith. This statement is true because every individual apart from the Redeemer is under the eternal death sentence from Almighty God. Jesus said that, “he who does not believe is condemned already” (Jn. 3:18). God says, “He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (Jn. 3:36). The Psalmist says, “You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with You. The boastful shall not stand in your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity. You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man” (5:4-5). “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

This dying thief, before his amazing conversion, was on the precipice of a Christless eternity, without God and without hope. He was unregenerate, weighted with a lifetime of sin and guilt and was in complete bondage to sin and the devil.
If you are not a Christian, then you need to realize that you are not very different from the robber on the cross. Yes, it may be true that you are not an insurrectionist and have not committed cold-blooded murder. Yet, you are guilty of sin. You have lived your life without trusting or serving Christ. And if you died this very moment, you would be cast into hell and forever be separated from our Lord’s love and presence. This very moment you are under the sentence of eternal death. But there is hope for you. For, if Jesus could transform the stony heart of that robber on the cross and completely save him at His weakest hour, then He most certainly can deliver you. Pray that God would open your eyes and ears to behold the amazing saving power of God’s beloved Son.

The Criminal’s Conversion

In his gospel Luke records that a radical change of mind occurred in one of the robbers crucified with Christ. At first, both robbers were railing against the Savior and “casting the same in His teeth” (Mt. 27:44; Mk. 15:32). But a time comes when the grace of God shines upon the heart of one of the criminals and that man displays an astonishing faith in God’s Son.

This dramatic and obvious conversion raises an important question. How was this wicked criminal converted while he hung on the cross? Obviously, there was no sermon or evangelistic message spoken to him while he was dying. There is no evidence that prayer was given on his behalf or that he had received prior instruction by one of our Lord’s disciples. Yet, this man repented of his sin, believed in Jesus and was admitted to paradise that very day. How can we account for this remarkable change of heart? To understand what occurred to the penitent thief on the cross that day there are a number of things to consider.

(1) It is important to note that this man was converted by the sovereign grace of God. Only God has the ability to turn blasphemers into worshippers. Only the Holy Spirit can take hearts of stone that are spiritually dead and turn them into hearts of flesh. Behold the power of Christ to save. “Salvation is of the Lord” (Jon. 2:9). The only biblical way that we can explain such a radical and sincere change in this robber is that God first did something to this man’s heart that no one could see. The Bible refers to this sovereign act of God as being “born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:5-6), “regeneration” (Tit. 3:5, Gk. palingenesia), “a new creation” (Gal. 6:15), “having been born again” (1 Pet. 1:23; cf. Jn. 3:3), a making alive with Christ (Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13), or a being “begotten by God” (Jn. 1:13; 1 Jn. 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). This change in man’s heart is so radical that Scripture describes it as a heart of stone becoming a heart of flesh (Ezek. 32:2) or an uncircumcised heart becoming a circumcised heart (Col. 2:11).

Both of these criminals were equally wicked and guilty. Both had the same unbelieving, unbiblical, blasphemous view of Jesus in the early hours of the crucifixion. Both were spiritually dead and blind as they mocked the Savior. Both also saw and heard everything relating to Christ during the nearly six hours He hung on the cross. “Yet one died in his sins, as he had lived, hardened, impenitent and unbelieving.”585 He died just as blind, guilty and spiritually dead as he was when the crucifixion began. But the other robber was regenerated by the Holy Spirit, enlightened and drawn to our Lord. Therefore, he repented, believed, confessed, prayed for mercy and was saved.

One purpose of this passage is to teach us that conversion is the fruit, not the cause, of regeneration. When there are two men of virtually identical character and condition; who both

are in the exact same circumstances; who have the very same information regarding the Savior; and, one becomes convicted and repents, while the other could not care less, the only biblical and rational explanation is that God changed one’s heart and passed the other by. This means that the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit raises dead hearts (Eph. 2:5) and enables sinners to see and hear the truth, causing them to repent and turn to Christ.

This is the explicit teaching of Scripture. “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). Without this spiritual renewal, which is purely a gift of God dependent upon nothing that we do, no one would turn to Christ. “For it is God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Note that Lydia, like the criminal on the cross, believed because God first opened her heart and enabled her to respond to the gospel. Paul “sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul” (Ac. 16:13-14). As our Lord said to Nicodemus, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn. 3:6). The Holy Spirit came upon one of the criminals and made him a spiritual person. Therefore, he saw the blessed Savior with new spiritual eyes and, thus, this cursing, blaspheming and railing rebel became in an instant of time a devout worshipper of Christ. This profound truth is the only way to explain the pervasive, radical change in the penitent thief’s heart.

This truth teaches two related things. First, when a sinner is saved, God alone deserves the credit and glory for his salvation. The Bible teaches that faith and repentance are gifts of God (cf. Jn. 3:3-8; 6:44-45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 2 Pet. 1:2; Ac. 11:18); that “[n]o one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him…. [n]o one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (Jn. 6:44; 65). The idea common in evangelical circles that regeneration is God’s response to man’s exercise of faith (i.e. decisional regeneration) is unscriptural and robs God of the glory that belongs only to Him. Second, the fact that unsaved men can only be changed spiritually and drawn to the Savior by the power of God should teach us humility. We were spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-5), with a heart of stone (Ezek. 11:19), living in spiritual darkness (Jn. 1:4-5), unable to repent (Jer. 13:23), totally helpless (Ezek. 16:4-6), spiritually blind (1 Cor. 2:14), with a sinful hatred of Christ (Jn. 3:19-21) and enslaved to the prince of darkness (Ac. 26:17-18). But God, while we were His enemies, reached out and touched our hearts giving us new spiritual life and causing us to love His precious Son. What a glorious salvation! We love Him only because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19). Obviously, we have nothing of which we can boast. If it were not for God’s grace, we would be just like the thief who died cursing Jesus. Without the work of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts we would be just as wicked, obstinate, unpentent and full of hatred toward Christ as that impenitent criminal. It is for this reason that we shall cast our crowns at His pierced feet when we behold Him in heaven (cf. Rev. 4:10).

(2) We need to examine the means used by the Holy Spirit to bring the penitent criminal to Christ. This is a more difficult topic than regeneration, for in the new birth God works immediately (i.e. without means) or directly upon the human heart. However, when it comes to the production of saving faith in the heart and laying hold of Jesus, the Bible teaches that something else is necessary. As Paul writes, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). James says, “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of His creatures” (Jas. 1:18). Under normal circumstances a
person is converted to Christ by the preaching of the gospel. Sometimes God will use Bible reading, a gospel tract or a Christian book to bring a sinner to the Savior. In other words, the Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit applies the Word of God to the regenerated heart in the process of conversion. Therefore, a genuine conversion presupposes a certain amount of biblical knowledge regarding the person and work of Christ. This teaching raises an important question: what did the Spirit of God use to convert this robber? There is no evidence that he had listened to our Lord preach or heard any sermons by the traveling disciples; however, it is a distinct possibility. But even if this robber had never heard Jesus or His disciples preach, given his Jewish upbringing and knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, he saw a number of things that could be used to lead him to Christ.

If the robber could hear the trial of our Lord he would have learned not only the major titles for the Messiah, but also of His innocence and righteousness. The Jewish leaders publicly accused Jesus of making Himself a king (Lk. 23:2) and our Lord acknowledged that He indeed was a king (Lk. 23:3; cf. Jn. 18:37). Pilate repeatedly referred to the Savior as a king of the Jews (Mk. 15:9; Jn. 18:39; 19:15) and even had the inscription “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews” (Jn. 19:19; Mk. 15:26; Mt. 27:37; Lk. 23:38) placed above the suffering Servant’s head on the cross. Perhaps when he thought about the trial and the inscription he thought, “Could this really be the Messiah, the king of the Jews?”

“This is he who wrought miracles, and raised the dead, and said that he was the Son of God; is it all true, and is he really our Messiah?” Then he would remember the words of the prophet Isaiah, “He was despised and rejected of men, a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. Surely, he hath borne our grieves, and carried our sorrows.” “Why,” he would say to himself, “I never understood that passage in the prophet Esaias before, but it must point to him. The chastisement of our peace is upon him. Can this be he who cried in the Psalms—‘they pierced my hands and my feet?’” As he looked at him again, he felt conviction creeping over his spirit. Then he looked again, and he marked how all men down below rejected, and despised, and hissed at him, and hooted him, and all this would make the case the more clear. “All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.”

Pilate identified Jesus as the Christ (Mt. 27:17) and the Jews said that our Lord claimed to be the Son of God (Jn. 19:7). Further, Pilate, who had no axe to grind, said that the Savior had done nothing worthy of death (Lk. 23:22; 23:15); had committed no crime (Jn. 18:38; 19:4, 6); and could not be proven to have done any evil (Mt. 27:23; Lk. 23:22). Both Pilate and his wife emphatically declared the Nazarene to be a righteous Man (Mt. 27:19, 24). If the thief was a witness to these events, the Holy Spirit would have applied these truths to his heart.

On the way to the cross, the criminal would have witnessed our Lord’s amazing words to the daughters of Jerusalem. The robber would have thought about these words. Jesus warns these women about the coming destruction in a unique manner. He does not speak as the prophets of old who would say, “Thus saith the LORD,” or “the LORD says.” This weakened, bleeding Man speaks as though He Himself both knows and controls the future. He speaks as the divine judge who rules the universe. The robber was right behind our Lord as He spoke those sober words. He saw the Master warn these unbelieving women with love in His eyes and the frightening truth on his lips.

Then the criminal saw something that the Holy Spirit would use to pierce his soul. He beheld the Savior interceding for His own people—“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34). One could reasonably expect to see a man falsely condemned, scourged, beaten, mocked and railed upon with insults and sarcasm to be cursing such a crowd. But Jesus, with His infinite love, is even here on the cross interceding for the elect, who out of ignorance are participants in His humiliation and murder. The robber learned that Christ is compassionate and merciful and takes a very active role in saving sinners. Such a Man not only dies for the sins of His people, but also works to apply that wonderful redemption unto them even when they are ethical scum and worthy of the curse and death. Later, when the Holy Spirit changed the thief’s heart, our Lord’s prayer would be precious to this robber. Perhaps he would think, “This Man of Sorrows was compassionate, loving and kind to his own who were involved in this wicked affair. He even interceded for them to God His Father. Therefore, I can place my faith in the King who is merciful to sinners and I can ask Him to remember me when He enters His glorious kingdom.” While obviously the robber’s understanding of the gospel would have been rudimentary and his appreciation of all that was taking place before him imperfect, nevertheless, the Holy Spirit used it all to such a great effect that this robber would become a teacher of faith and repentance to the whole world.

There was even (paradoxically) a gospel message set forth in the mocking of the chief priests, scribes and elders. They cried out, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save” (Mt. 27:42, Mk. 15:31). The point the Jewish leaders were trying to set forth before the crowd was that if Jesus cannot even save Himself from suffering and death, then why should we recognize His claim to be the Messiah—the Son of God (cf. Mt. 27:42-43; Mk. 15:32)? Even the robbers joined in this blasphemous mockery. But once the Holy Spirit planted a new spiritual life in the heart of that dying criminal and began to draw him to the Redeemer, those words of mockery took on a whole new meaning. “He saved others. Then can He not also save me? If He has the power to save others, then certainly He can also save me.”

One thing is clear when we examine this thief’s confession. His mockery that spoke of a salvation in terms merely of physical deliverance from suffering and death was changed by the Holy Spirit to a concern for deliverance from spiritual death (i.e. deliverance from the guilt and penalty of sin). The robber’s outlook was changed by the Spirit from a concern and focus upon this world to the world to come. The words that the crowd cast in the Savior’s teeth as mockery became precious gospel truths to this dying sinner. As Spurgeon eloquently notes, “You may pick a jewel from a dunghill, and find its radiance undiminished; and you may gather the gospel from a blasphemous mouth, and it shall be none the less the gospel of salvation. Peradventure this man learned the gospel from those who jested at our dying Lord; and so the servants of the devil were unconsciously made to be the servants of Christ.”

As the criminal was dying on the cross the Holy Spirit convicted him of the profound truth that, in order to save His people, Jesus could not save Himself. If Christ was to fulfill His mission, then He had to die on the cross as a propitiating sacrifice unto God. As we shall see when we examine the robber’s confession, he believed that our Lord’s death was not in vain, or useless, or a defeat. Rather, he looked to it as a victory that ushered in the Messianic kingdom. Beloved, we must never underestimate or doubt the Savior’s ability to save even the most wicked and obstinate sinners by the power of His Spirit. The Spirit of God took the information that this robber had regarding the Master and so convicted and converted his heart that he went from being a blasphemer to a worshipper in only a short period of time. “[H]e displayed astonishing

587 Ibid.
faith by committing himself and his salvation to the protection of Christ, while he saw him hanging on the cross near death.”

Evidences of the Criminal’s Faith and Repentance

When a person is truly converted to Christ there will be fruit (doctrinally and morally) or evidences that demonstrate repentance and saving faith. As James says, “Faith without works is dead” (2:20). What is particularly interesting about Luke’s record of this dying robber’s interaction with Jesus is the clear and abundant evidence of his conversion. This is especially amazing when we keep in mind that he was literally nailed to a cross. He was never baptized. He never attended church and he was never able to use his hands or feet to do any good works. We learn solely of this man’s faith from his lips. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt. 12:34). There are a number of distinct evidences of this robber’s conversion to examine.

First, he came to our Lord’s defense in rebuking his partner in crime. “Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, ‘If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.’ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?’” (Lk. 23:40). This is an amazing statement for someone who, not long before, was joining in such railing against Jesus. Note how this statement is rich in theological meaning.

The robber emphatically rebukes his fellow sinner for not fearing God by his behavior. “This implies that it was the fear of God which restrained him from following the multitude to do this evil.” In fact he now feared God so much that he would not even allow another person to mock God in his presence. This dying criminal had been changed by the Holy Spirit and now he no longer cared about what the world thought or what the crowd said, but his chief concern was what God thought. With his new heart of flesh came a love for God and Christ. He could not bear to hear his old comrade making fun of his precious Savior. This penitent criminal had a radical change of mind, a complete about-face regarding his view of God and the Redeemer. He publicly and dramatically retracts all his earlier unbelieving statements and takes his place beside Jesus.

The penitent robber’s rebuke presupposes that all such blasphemous comments toward the Redeemer will have their due recompense of reward after death and that every sinful remark will be answerable to God. The gist of his rebuke is, “Look, don’t you have any fear of God at all? You are under the sentence of death and are about to be ushered into the very presence of Almighty God. Is it not time to stop following the wicked crowd when you know that the Nazarene is righteous and innocent?” In the moment when all voices are raised against Christ from the political and religious leaders, the scholars, the Roman executioners and the large body of onlookers, this criminal displayed an astonishing loyalty to the Savior. “This malefactor is the last man who, before the death of Jesus, disposes a testimony in honor of Him.”

This public expression of faith and loyalty is a blessed example to every Christian. Do we remain silent when relatives, fellow students or co-workers mock our Lord and His holy Word? In our decaying, wicked and degenerate culture, is it not crucial for believers to call sin a sin and rebuke it? If Christians who claim to believe in the inerrancy and perfection of Scripture are

589 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:828.
unwilling to rebuke sin, then who will do it? The secular humanists, sodomite perverts and baby murdering feminists certainly won’t. Yet, a great many professing Christians in our day not only refuse to do their duty to be a salt and light to culture but also are quick to condemn those who are attempting to take a public stand for Christ and His law word. “Do you not know that a person who is silent when a wrong thing is said or done may become a participator in the sin? If you do not rebuke sin—I mean, of course, on all fit occasions, and in a proper spirit—your silence will give consent to the sin, and you will be an aider and abettor in it.”

Second, the robber acknowledged his sin and guilt. “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds” (Lk. 23:40-41). One crucial element of repentance is that we have a change of mind regarding our sin and acknowledge that our sins are sinful, wrong, evil, and against God’s throne. There must be an honest acknowledgement of our sin and guilt before God. This is precisely what occurred with the criminal on the cross. As a robber and insurrectionist, he justified his sinful behavior by various excuses. Perhaps he believed that his unlawful actions would lead to a greater good—the liberation of Palestine. He may have reasoned that as an insurrectionist he was involved in a just war. Therefore, committing murder and robbery were justified by unique circumstances. In any case he lived out a worldview that justified killing the innocent and taking their goods.

But now that the Holy Spirit had changed his heart, all of that self-justification and excuse-making disappears. He begins to see his sins as God sees them and now loathes his sins and despises his past lifestyle as warfare not against Rome, but against a thrice holy God. He acknowledges that he deserves to die for what he has done. He freely admits that God’s wrath against his sin is just. “Note, true penitents acknowledge the justice of God in all the punishment of their sin.” He has abandoned a spirit of human autonomy in ethics and has accepted the biblical teaching that the law of God is holy, just and good (Rom. 7:12). He has laid down the weapons of his warfare with God and said, “Lord, I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done evil in Your sight” (Ps. 51:3-4). “There is no more certain sign of an effectual work of the Holy Spirit of God than a readiness on the sinner’s part to accept and acquiesce in whatever his punishment may be, to put his mouth in the dust and say, ‘Thou art righteous, O God, that dost this;’ ‘Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sin?’ (Lam. iii.39; cf. Ezra ix.6, 7; Luke xv.18, 19)…. How profound the conviction, how unreserved upon his part is the confession, of sin!”

This robber’s repentance reminds us that genuine faith is always accompanied by repentance. We cannot expect to be saved from our sins if we do not acknowledge the awful evil of our transgressions, admitting our guilt and endeavoring not to continue in the sin that God hates. If a person has a very light view of sin and intends to continue in it, then he has no reason to believe that he is a child of God. “Let us beware of a repentance without evidences.” Let us pray that God would open our eyes and subdue our hearts so that we would loathe our sins and take up our cross daily. There are multitudes of professing Christians today who have accepted the diabolical doctrine that repentance is not necessary for salvation. While it is true that we are

592 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:828.
saved solely by Christ apart from any works of the law, nevertheless true faith is always accompanied by repentance.

Third, the criminal openly confessed the innocence of the Savior. “Do you not even fear God seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong” (Lk. 23:41). The word “amis” (KJV) or “wrong” (NKJV) atopos, is compounded of alpha, “negative” and topos, “place.” Therefore, it literally means “out of place.” Thus, the criminal is not simply asserting that our Lord is not guilty of any criminal act, but also is not guilty of any sin. Consequently, the robber with his half-dead, mangled body, racked with pain, relied on the grace of Christ and confessed his faith in the righteousness of the Redeemer.

The Holy Spirit enlightened his mind to the beauty and perfection of the Lamb of God who is without spot and without blemish. Here the robber publicly rebukes the whole nation of Israel and testifies that Jesus died as an innocent Man. “When all other voices were silent, one suffering penitent spake out, and said—‘This man hath done nothing amiss.” Luke repeatedly emphasizes Christ’s innocence (cf. 23:4, 14, 15, 47) because our Lord had to be sinless for His sacrifice to be efficacious as an expiation for the sins of the world.

Note the excellent example of the penitent’s confession and faith. First, he acknowledges that he is sinful and guilty and has nothing to offer God; his whole life ethically in God’s sight is a stinking pile of rubbish. Then he looks away from himself to the righteousness of Christ. Every person must be saved in the same manner as that penitent robber. First, we must acknowledge that we are sinful and guilty before God and that we have nothing in ourselves that merits salvation or any approach to God whatsoever. We have guilty records and corrupt hearts; we need to be saved from what we have done and what we are. Second, we need to look to Christ for salvation. We must believe that our sins were placed upon the Savior on the cross. Like the penitent criminal we must have a child-like trust in what the Nazarene accomplished.

Fourth, the criminal makes a request or prays to Christ. “Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom’” (Lk. 23:42). This short prayer is remarkable for its depth of theological truth. It contains a number of memorable elements.

(1) Note that he addresses the Savior as Lord. He acknowledges that Jesus is the Messianic King and the Son of God. This prayer presupposes the deity of Christ. “The petition is worded as if he felt, ‘Only let Christ think of me, and it is enough. Let him remember me, and the thought of his mind will be effectual for everything that I shall need in the world to come.’ This is to impute Godhead to Christ.” With the eyes of faith this robber saw the Master as One who would soon be seated at the right hand of God. Calvin writes,

I know not that, since the creation of the world, there ever was a more remarkable and striking example of faith; and so much the greater admiration is due to the grace of the Holy Spirit, of which it affords so magnificent a display. A robber, who not only had not been educated in the school of Christ, but by giving himself up to execrable murders, had endeavoured to extinguish all sense of what was right, suddenly rises higher than all the apostles and the other disciples whom the Lord himself had taken so much pains to instruct; and not only so, but he adores Christ as a King while on the gallows, celebrates his kingdom in the midst of shocking and worse than revolting abasement, and declares him, when dying, to be the Author of life.

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The penitent criminal asks Jesus to remember him when he enters His kingdom. This short request reveals a strong and sturdy faith in a number of important biblical truths. This petition presupposes that the life of the soul continues after death, such that physical death does not mean the end of our existence. Further, the robber has an understanding that in the world to come there is punishment for the wicked and a reward for those who believe. “Lord I believe in you. I trust in Your power to save. Remember me as You sit on Your throne of glory.”

The robber understands that in the world to come it is the crucified Savior who determines our place. He knows that Christ is the judge of all mankind. This criminal looks to the Lord as the gate of heaven. He places himself upon the bosom of Jesus knowing that the Redeemer is his only hope in life and death. He believes that to be remembered by the Master means that he has a favorable relationship with Him. This remembering is not simply an intellectual affair, but involves thinking upon with love. The penitent robber is looking to his relationship with Christ as his only hope in entering the kingdom of heaven. This amazing request shows us the power of the Holy Spirit to illuminate the mind and turn ignorant criminals into brilliant theologians.

The penitent robber’s request reveals a biblical understanding of the Mediator’s kingdom. The vast majority of Jews at that time, including the political and religious leaders, were looking for a political-military Messiah who would crush Rome and exalt the Jewish nation. But this dying criminal places his trust in a dying Messiah, a king under the dark cloud of humiliation. Thus, we see in this man a Spirit-given perception that the kingdom of God came by the bloody cross of Christ and not the blood-stained sword of revolution. This robber now embraced a doctrine of the kingdom that was the very opposite of his old opinion. The Holy Spirit turned a violent, cruel insurrectionist into a humble servant of the crucified King. Is this not proof that with God all things are possible (Mt. 19:26)?

Note also the great humility in this prayer. The penitent criminal does not ask for any great privilege in the kingdom. He does not request to be seated on the right or left hand of Jesus. He knows that he does not deserve any place of honor; he simply wants to be remembered. He is not concerned with gold streets, pearly gates and bejeweled crowns. He wants the heart and love of the Mediator. “Oh, Lord, just think of me with your loving heart; remember that I believe in You. I trust in your precious blood. The only thing I want Lord is to be with You.” What a beautiful request! Beloved, let this penitent criminal be our teacher in the school of faith. Oh, Lord, remember us and we shall be safe; think of us and we will be secure; intercede for us poor sinners who are burdened with a sense of sin and we shall dwell with You forever. Master, you have promised us saying, “The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out” (Jn. 6:37). We have come and placed our trust in You, in Your precious blood and sinless life and we rejoice that You have given us sonship and eternal life.

Our Lord’s Promise to the Penitent Criminal

After the dying robber confesses Christ and asks the Lord to remember him, Jesus answers with a glorious promise. “And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise’” (Lk. 23:43). There are three things to consider regarding our Savior’s answer. First, this answer teaches us about the amazing power and willingness of Christ to save sinners. Second, it proves the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Third, it says a number of things about the afterlife. First, the reply of our Lord is a glorious example of the
Savior’s love and power extended to His people. Jesus’ love and power is exhibited by the reassuring, comforting words He used as well as His specific promise. Note the following: a) The Mediator gives the penitent criminal much more than he ever requested. The robber had only asked to be remembered when the King entered His kingdom. The penitent criminal expects the Lord to think about him because he believes that distance, space and time will exist between himself and the glorified King. But Jesus says, “Instead of being merely remembered, you will be with Me. You will live in My presence. I will not keep you at a distance but I will receive you, as it were, into My very bosom.” The robber, having believed, confessed and prayed, is promised perfect fellowship and communion with the Son of God.

Also, while the robber had in mind some indefinite, future time, our Lord promised an immediate emancipation: “Today you will be with Me in paradise.” “What a change from the cross to the crown, from the anguish of Calvary to the glory of the New Jerusalem! In those few hours the beggar was lifted from the dunghill and set among princes…. Can you measure the change from that sinner, loathsome in his iniquity, when the sun was high at noon, to that same sinner, clothed in pure white, and accepted in the Beloved, in the paradise of God, when the sun went down? O glorious Saviour, what marvels thou canst work!”

“This robber breakfasted with the devil, but he dined with Christ on earth, and supped with Him in paradise. This was a short work, but a blessed work.”

This word to the dying robber shows us that there is a graciousness and richness to our salvation that is almost beyond our human comprehension. As Paul says, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21). There is a saving love in the heart of Jesus for His people that goes far beyond the greatest love on earth. It is infinitely greater than even the love a mother has for her child. Our Lord loved His people so much that He came to earth to die for them and He loves to rescue these sinners from the terrors of hell. He achieved a perfect redemption on their behalf and He personally, lovingly applies that salvation to each sinner for whom He died.

This robber was given the greatest comfort by these words as he suffered severe affliction. This incident should teach us to cling to the precious promises of the Savior as we endure persecution, calamity and heartache. “So then, if we are dreadfully tormented in body, we ought to be on our guard lest the severity of pain hinder us from tasting the goodness of God; but on the contrary, all our afflictions ought to be mitigated and soothed by this single consolation, that as soon as God has received us into his favour, all the afflictions which we endure are aids to our salvation. This will cause our faith not only to rise victorious over all our distresses, but to enjoy calm repose amidst the endurance of sufferings.”

b) The salvation freely given by the Mediator is assured because it comes from Christ. Our Lord spoke to the robber with a divine authority when He said, “Assuredly I say to you.” The word “assuredly” or “amen” reveals that Jesus was a King and Mediator as He hung on the cross. Even at His lowest point of humiliation He could save souls. The robber’s faith meets with an immediate absolution and promise of heaven. Only the Savior could say this. “By this word Jesus acquits this criminal of sin and guilt. By this word he here and now unlocks heaven for him.”

“He speaks royally, ‘Verily I say unto thee.’ Are they not imperial words? The Lord is a

King in whose word there is power. What he says now no one can gainsay. He that hath the keys of hell and of death saith, ‘I say unto thee, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”’ Who shall prevent the fulfillment of his word?  

We must learn from this that when Jesus speaks a word of assurance to us, there is a certainty that is the anchor of our faith and hope. Many people think that if they could only see and hear the Savior speak to them in person they would have faith and assurance. But such thinking ignores the fact that the promises we have in the Bible are “God breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16-17) and just as sure and reliable as a direct Word from Christ. God said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Ac. 16:31). Jesus promised “That whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:15); that, “whoever believes in Him is not condemned” (Jn. 3:18). The Holy Spirit promised, “That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Just as the Savior gave this believing robber His certain word of forgiveness and eternal life, His infallible written Word gives us believing sinners that same certainty. Look to the death of the Savior as well as the promises that flow from His perfect redemption. If you confess Him, He will confess you before His heavenly Father (Lk. 12:8).

c) The salvation given by the Mediator is particular. One criminal was converted by God while the other was not. Jesus spoke words of life and peace to the believing robber and says not one word to the other. The impotent robber proves that suffering, torture and death is insufficient to cause conversion. It demonstrates that conversion is a great miracle caused by the Holy Spirit. The idea that is common in evangelical circles that the Holy Spirit is working equally to convert all men and that the ultimate reason some believe and some do not believe lies in the heart of man is dangerous and heretical. Paul said that “no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Luke declared that “as many as were ordained to eternal life believed” (Ac. 13:48). “For who makes you to differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). “Man needs for God to draw him irresistibly by His grace, or man will never make so much as a single step in the direction of Christ.” “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (Jn. 6:44).

This point is important because the story of the penitent criminal has been used by people as an excuse to postpone repentance so that they can continue in sin. Once we understand, however, that this man was converted by God and was not the author of his own salvation, then we see the incredible folly of those who delay repentance to an indefinite future or even until their death bed. The passage before us teaches that God can convert even the most wicked, obstinate sinner at any time or any place, even on the verge of death. It, however, does not say that we can change our own wicked hearts and turn over a new leaf without a work of sovereign grace at any time we please. People who think this and put off bowing the knee to Christ have twisted the Scriptures to their own destruction. A person who purposely delays repentance so that he can serve his lusts demonstrates that he does not have saving faith, but at the most has only a mere historical faith in the gospel. Repentance in a hypothetical future is no repentance at all. Such thinking is merely an excuse for unbelief, for living a life of ethical autonomy from God. Make no mistake. If this is your thinking, then you are not a Christian. You are still at war with God. While it is true that while there is life there is hope, we must not abuse God’s
goodness and longsuffering nature which is intended to lead to repentance. In God’s sovereign
good pleasure only one criminal was saved so that none may despair, but only one, so that none
may presume.  

Second, our Lord’s statement to the penitent criminal proves the doctrine of justification
by faith alone. Note, Jesus did not say to the robber, “Today you will enter purgatory.” With one
blessed sentence the Savior completely overthrows the Roman Catholic doctrine that most
Christians enter an intermediate state for further purification after death. Because the Papal
church believes that God only saves people who are personally or subjectively righteous, they
have accepted the human tradition that believers who are not good enough to go to heaven
have their venial sins eliminated through the tortures of purgatory (see the Council of Trent, 25th
session; Baltimore Catechism, sec. XIV, no. 181, 129).

Jesus promised the dying criminal that he would go directly to heaven when he died. The
robb er received complete forgiveness for all of his sins and a title to eternal life. The moment a
person believes in Christ all of his sins (past, present and future) are completely forgiven. The
Savior took away all of those sins as well as their spiritual penalty when He died on the cross.
Thus, our Lord said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him
who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death
unto life” (Jn. 5:24). This means that believers are in possession of eternal life now. They do not
have to merit it, earn it, do good works to achieve it, or suffer in purgatory to attain it. The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory is based on the demonic doctrine that the Messiah’s
aton ing death was insufficient to remove all guilt and penalty of sin. Further, it ignores the
biblical teaching that our Lord’s perfect obedience to the law as the second Adam merited eternal
life for us (Mt. 3:15; Rom. 5:10-20; 1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:8-9; Zech. 3:3-4).

Our Lord’s statement to the dying thief disproves all systems of works salvation. There
are some who assert that on the day of judgment God will weigh one’s “good works” against the
bad and if the “good deeds” tip the scales then that person will be allowed to enter heaven.
Others, such as Roman Catholics, believe that heaven is only opened for believers after they
achieve a state of personal righteousness. Auburn Avenue heretics assert that God only justifies
a person after their covenant faithfulness is evaluated on the day of judgment. Jesus completely
refuted all of these deadly legalistic errors when he said to the criminal, “Today you will be with
Me in Paradise.” Did this robber live a life of good works? No! His whole life was dedicated to
gross sin and debauchery. Only moments before his conversion he was blaspheming the Son of
God. Was this criminal personally righteous before Christ’s glorious promise? No! Subjectively
there was nothing in him to commend him to God. Thankfully, “God imputes righteousness apart

never believed in such a place as purgatory. The word appears nowhere in the Bible. The idea of purgatory and
prayers for the souls in purgatory was not known in the professing church to any degree until A.D. 600 when Pope
Gregory the Great made claims about a third state—a place for the purification of souls before their entrance into
heaven. It was not accepted as a dogma of the Catholic Church, however, until 1459 at the Council of Florence.
Ninety years later, the Council of Trent confirmed this dogma by cursing those who wouldn’t accept the doctrine”
(Heresies of Rome, 82 as quoted in Ralph Woodrow, Babylon Mystery Religion: Ancient and Modern [Riverside,
CA: Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1966], 71).
606 Believers will grow in practical holiness over time as they seek to live and obey Christ, yet this holiness can in no
way contribute to their justification before God. Good works are the fruit of justification and never the ground,
instrument or cause of it. The Romanist teaching that the Protestant doctrine of justification leads to antinomianism
and licentiousness is absolutely false doctrinally and historically. Bible-believing Protestants have always
emphasized the need for personal godliness and attending the means of grace.
from works” (Rom. 4:6). “When we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6).

The criminal simply believed in the Savior, trusted in Him for salvation without any personal righteousness or good works and was immediately justified before God. As Paul said, “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:20-24; read 3:28; 4:3-8; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:8-9; Ac. 13:39; etc).

The Bible teaches that our own so-called righteousness contributes absolutely nothing to our salvation because: (1) all of our good works are tainted with sin and non-meritorious (Lk. 17:10); and, (2) God demands an absolute moral perfection of His rational creatures in thought, word and deed. Such an accomplishment is obviously impossible. Therefore, like that penitent robber and even like Paul, the greatest apostle, we must look at all of our “good works” or “moral achievements” as filthy rags before God and look solely to Christ for salvation. The apostle said, “I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Phil. 3:8-9). Paul “draws a contrast between two kinds of righteousness—the one being of man, the other, from God. He intimates, accordingly, that one is the reward of works, while the other is a free gift of God. He thus, in a general way, places man’s merit in opposition to Christ’s grace; for while the law brings works, faith presents man before God as naked, that he may be clothed with the righteousness of Christ.”

Jesus’ promise also refutes all forms of sacramentalism. The penitent robber died unbaptized, yet all of his sins were forgiven. The criminal was regenerated and saved without the water of baptism. Thus, baptism is not an automatic conveyer of grace as sacramentalists assert, but rather is a sign and seal of what God does to the heart. While water baptism is not necessary to salvation, Spirit baptism certainly is. The penitent criminal would have been baptized if he had the opportunity, but he could not and still went straight to heaven. This example explicitly contradicts Roman Catholic dogma that water baptism “delivers from the guilt of original sin and of all actual sins committed up to the time of baptism…and sets man free from eternal punishment….“ To avoid this difficulty some writers of Romish tendency have actually caught at the idea, suggested by Augustine, that he was baptized with the blood and water which came from our Lord’s side, when it was pierced with a spear! This baseless and gratuitous assertion shows the absurdities into which men may be driven to maintain their theory of baptismal regeneration. It is clear that the thief was born again. It is equally clear that he was never baptized. It follows therefore that a man may be born again without baptism.

Third, the Savior’s statement proves that the souls of believers who die go immediately to heaven to be with Jesus. This point is established by the following: a) The word paradise (Gk. paradeisos) is used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 as a synonym for the word heaven. In this

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chapter “the first heaven was that of the clouds, the second that of the stars, the third that of the redeemed…. [N]otice that the man who, according to verse 2, was said to have been caught up to heaven, was caught up to paradise according to verse 4. This certainly indicates that heaven and paradise are the same place and not two different places.”

The word “paradise,” which is a transliteration of the Greek word, is believed to be of Persian origin. “Among the Greeks it was first used by the historian Xenophon in reference to the parks of Persian kings and nobles (A-S, p. 338). He describes it as shady and well watered. And so it came to mean ‘a garden, pleasureground; grove, park.’” Interestingly the same Greek word is used in the Greek Septuagint translation of Genesis 2:8: “God planted a paradise in Eden.” “As the paradise in Eden, the primeval place of beauty and happiness, had been closed to the human family after the apostasy, our Lord seems to have selected this term as expressive of the fact that a higher and more blessed paradise was now opened, that the paradise lost was now to be regained, and rendered accessible to all, who by faith would so unite themselves to the second Adam, as to entitle them to be with Him in blessedness and glory.”

b) This teaching is supported by the whole New Testament. Paul said that believers are confident “to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). Speaking of his future death the apostle said he had “a desire to depart and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23). The writer of Hebrews describes the members of the invisible church as the “church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:23). When John was transported to heaven, he saw “the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God” (Rev. 20:4).

The passage before us refutes a number of erroneous doctrines. It disproves the idea that the soul of man goes to sleep at death and does not awaken until the resurrection (psychopannychy). This teaching has been advocated throughout the history of the church (e.g., some Anabaptists, the Irvingites, Jehovah’s Witnesses or Russelites, and some Adventist sects). This view is based on passages which speak of death as sleep (e.g., Mt. 9:24; Ac. 7:60; 1 Cor. 15:51; 1 Thess. 4:13) and verses which speak of the dead as unconscious (e.g., Ps. 6:5; 30:9; 115:17; 146:4; Eccl. 9:10; Isa. 38:18, 19). The problem with these arguments is that the clearer portions of Scripture must be used to interpret the less clear. Obviously, when our Lord said “today,” He did not mean the final resurrection thousands of years in the future. Also, the Bible never says that the soul goes to sleep. When the body dies, it appears to be asleep. That is what is meant. Likewise, a dead body is not conscious of its surroundings. That reality, however, does not negate the fact that upon death the souls of the redeemed go immediately to heaven.

It also disproves secular humanism or materialism which teaches that at death the soul ceases to exist forever. This satanic idea (which is based solely upon a presupposition or a blind faith in anti-Christian secular science) is responsible for countless people casting off all ethical restraint in order to serve their selfish lusts. After all, if death ends everything, then is it not logical to live like a beast and say “let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32)? Not only does our Lord’s statement refute such thinking, but the atheistic view of death renders all concepts of justice and meaning null and void. If the destiny of the human race is to turn into compost and afterward be destroyed by a supernova, then all human history is a meaningless

black void: no justice, no memories, no records, no history, no love, and no future—nothing. Such was the thinking of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Hitler. Such thinking leads directly to abortion, human fetal experimentation, euthanasia, the death camps of Auschwitz and the Gulag Archipelago.

c) It refutes the idea of Sheol as a shadowy underworld. Modernist scholars often teach that the Old Testament term Sheol or the New Testament word Hades refers to an abode for the dead that is neither heaven nor hell. Some see Sheol as divided into two compartments, one for the righteous dead—Paradise; the other for the wicked—Gehenna. A study of Scripture, however, reveals that the terms do not contradict the New Testament teaching regarding heaven and hell. A study of the terms Sheol and Hades reveals that they are not always used in the same sense. They can be used in an abstract sense to designate the state of death or the grave. “Since both believers and unbelievers at the termination of their life enter into the state of death, it can be said figuratively that they are without distinction in sheol or hades. They all alike are in the state of death”613 (cf. 1 Sam. 2:6; Job 14:13, 14; 17:13, 14; Ps. 87:48; Hos. 13:14; hades, cf. Ac. 2:27, 31; Rev. 6:8; 20:28). “There are also several passages in which sheol and hades seem to designate the grave… (Gen. 37:25; 42:38; 44:29; 29:31; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Job 14:13; 17:13; 21:13; Ps. 6:5; 88:3; Eccl. 9:10).”614

Sheol or Hades can also refer to hell. “And being in torments in Hades, he lifted his eyes and saw Abraham afar off…. Then, he cried and said…I am tormented in this flame” (Lk. 16:23, 24). In Hades the unsaved are fully conscious, with memories and their senses, yet are living in continual torment. Revelation says that after the final judgment everyone who is unsaved and Hades itself will be cast into the lake of fire (20:13-15). “In the Old Testament the word sheol is used more often for grave and less often for hell, while in the New Testament the corresponding use of hades the contrary holds.”615

d) Our Lord’s statement disproves the misleading and unfortunate statement in “the apostles’ creed” that Jesus, after His death on the cross, “descended into hell.” The idea that the Savior descended into hell or the place where unsaved souls are suffering torment is nowhere taught in Scripture and explicitly contradicts the statement, “Today, you will be with Me in Paradise.”

But, someone may ask, doesn’t the King James Version say in Acts 2:27, “you will not leave my soul in hell”? Indeed it does. This translation, however, is inaccurate. The New King James says, “For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption” (2:27; cf. 2:31). Peter, who quotes Psalm 16:10, is not teaching that our Lord at His death went down to the subterranean region of hell to strike His enemies with terror or proclaim His victory over the devil. In Psalm 16:10 David uses the word nephesh which can mean soul, life, a living creature or person.

The following passages refer to the latter: “Whosoever hath killed any soul—person” [Num. 31:19]; “Let my soul,—let me die the death of the righteous” [Num. 23:10]; and “Let my soul, let me die with the Philistines” [Judges 16:30]. The expression, Psalm xvi.10, might be explained in the same sense: “Thou wilt not leave my soul,” that is, MYSELF. But, what is more in point, Nephesh signifies even a dead animal, or a corpse: “He that toucheth the dead body of any man, shall be unclean seven days” [Num. 19:11]: “Whosoever toucheth the dead body of any man that is dead” [Num. 19:13], &c. Innumerable phrases of the same sort might be quoted. Why

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613 Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 685.
614 Ibid, 686.
615 Ibid.
then may we not, with the venerable Beza, in his first edition of the New Testament, understand at least if not translate, the Psalmist’s expression thus; “Thou will not leave my dead body in the grave.” For we have now seen that a dead body is sometimes meant by Nephesh; and...Sheol sometimes means the grave.616

Thus, Acts chapter 2 verses 27 and 31 are teaching that the Savior’s body will not be left in the grave and will not be allowed to decay. This fits with the contrast of David in verse 29, “He is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.”

Another passage used as a proof text for the doctrine that Jesus’ soul went down to hell after His death is Ephesians 4:9, “Now this, ‘He ascended’—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?” Does the phrase “the lower parts of the earth” refer to hell? No, it does not. Note the following reasons.

(1) Paul is discussing Psalm 68:18. His use of the phrase “into the lower parts of the earth” comes directly from the Old Testament Scriptures. If we examine how this expression is used in the Old Testament, we will see that it does not refer to hell. Psalm 139:15 uses this expression poetically to describe a mother’s womb. Isaiah uses it to describe the surface of the earth in opposition to heaven (49:23). Most examples use the expression to describe the grave or being placed in the earth (Ps. 63:9; Ezek. 26:26 and 32:24. In Ezekiel 31:14 we see a poetical progression: “death…the depths of the earth [i.e. the grave]…the Pit [or hell].”) Although some commentators see Ezekiel 32:24 (“There is Elam and all her multitude, all around her grave, all of them slain, fallen by the sword, who have gone down uncircumcised to the lower parts of the earth…; now they bear their shame with those who go down to the Pit”) as speaking of Hades, it more likely refers to the grave. Note the progression: slain (i.e. death); the lower parts of the earth (i.e. the grave); the Pit (i.e. hell).

(2) There is nothing in the context of Psalm 68:18 or Ephesians 4:8-9 that suggests Christ went into hell. Further, such an interpretation would explicitly contradict the gospels: “Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit” (Lk. 23:46). “Jesus…yielded up His spirit” (Mt. 27:50). “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30). Jesus experienced hell on the cross not when He was in the tomb, even though His physical body was still in a state of humiliation. “Today, shalt thou be with me in Paradise” (Lk. 23:43). “Nor is there any hint of it in Phil. 2 or, for that matter, anywhere else in Paul’s epistles. According to the Gospels the dying Christ committed his soul to the Father. On the day of resurrection it was restored to the body from which it had been taken.”

Ephesians 4:9 refers to the incarnation of Christ with an emphasis on our Lord’s humiliation. The Savior had to descend (cf. Jn. 3:13; 6:33, 38; 6:41, 42, 50, 51, 58) and suffer humiliation (Phil. 2:7ff.) before He was glorified and before He ascended to sit at the right hand of God.

Perhaps, the most common text in support of the idea that Jesus went into hell after His sacrifice is 1 Peter 3:19-20: “By whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is eight souls were saved through water.”

That our Lord did not preach to the wicked dead after His death is proven by the following remarks.

616 Herman Witsius, Sacred Dissertations on What is Commonly Called the Apostles’ Creed, Donald Fraser, Translator, (Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, [1823] 1993), 2:143-144. The Geneva Bible’s translation of this verse is better than the KJV. It reads: “Because thou wilt not leave my soul in [the] grave, neither wilt suffer thine Holy one to see corruption” (Ac. 2:27).

a) The disobedient people who were preached to are identified not as all the wicked dead, but only those “in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared” (1 Pet. 3:20). If this passage teaches that the Savior went to the infernal region to preach, then why does it only include people who lived during the 120 years prior to the flood? “The reference to the time of Noah is of course explicit and obvious.”\textsuperscript{618}

b) The context (verse 18—“by the Spirit”) indicates that Christ did not preach to the people of Noah’s day in His incarnate human nature, but that His Spirit preached. This means that Jesus was preaching to the people of the antediluvian world by the Spirit through Noah. Therefore, verse 19 must mean that He went and preached to the disembodied spirits who are now in prison. “That is, the men to whom Noah preached are now in Peter’s day suffering their just recompense. This is not just a guess, but is based on Peter’s manner of speech. In 4:6 we shall see that the Gospel was preached to certain people who are now dead.”\textsuperscript{619}

c) The word translated “preached” (\textit{ekeruxen}) in the New Testament almost always refers to the preaching of the gospel or the proclamation of salvation. There are no examples of this word being used for a judicial announcement of judgment. Indeed, 2 Peter 2:5 refers to Noah as “a preacher of righteousness.” Any idea that our Lord preached the gospel to the people in hell, limbo or purgatory is unscriptural and must be rejected. The Bible teaches that there are no second chances for those who die without Christ. “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). Further, Scripture indicates that the public vindication of Jesus against all His dead and living enemies will be on the day of judgment, not while His human body was still in a state of humiliation (e.g., Mt. 25:31-46).

Chapter 16: Jesus Cares for His Mother

Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, “Woman, behold thy son!” Then saith he to the disciple, “Behold thy mother!” And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. (Jn. 19:25-27)

Introduction

The apostle John alone records the touching interaction between Jesus, His mother and John himself that occurred shortly before the earth descended into the three hours of darkness. The statement in the synoptic gospels (Mt. 27:55, 56; Mk. 15:40; Lk. 23:49) about the “women that followed Him from Galilee,” including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and of Joses, and Salome (perhaps the mother of the sons of Zebedee), who “stood afar off seeing these things” refers to a later period much closer to the moment of Christ’s death. John’s account refers to a time when perhaps the mockery and fierce outbursts of anger had died down a bit and the beloved disciple and the women could move very close to the cross. There is historical evidence that indicates it was not uncommon for Roman soldiers to allow relatives and friends of

\textsuperscript{618} Gordon H. Clark, \textit{A Commentary on First and Second Peter} (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, [1967, 72] 1993), 130.

\textsuperscript{619} Ibid, 129.
the person crucified to come near the cross to mourn and sympathize for the victim. John and the women had come near the cross to watch and wait because of their love and devotion toward the Savior. After the darkness, or perhaps after the phenomena accompanying the death of Christ, the women of their own accord or at the instructions of the soldiers move away from the cross to observe at a distance. The reason that John mentions these women at this point in the narrative rather than later like the synoptics is because John lists them to introduce the Savior’s instructions in verses 26 and 27. There are a number of things to consider regarding this incident.

First, who are the women mentioned by John? Second, what is our Lord telling John and His mother to do? Third, what are some lessons and applications that can be learned from our text?

The Women Listed by John

Depending on how one reads the list by John there are either three or four women mentioned. Many see the list as (1) Jesus’ mother, (2) His mother’s sister, (3) Mary of Clopas (i.e. Mary the wife or daughter of Clopas), and (4) Mary Magdalene. Others read it as: (1) Jesus’ mother, (2) His mother’s sister—Mary of Clopas, and (3) Mary Magdalene. Biblical interpreters are almost equally divided on this point.

Scholars who argue for four women see the list as composed of two pairs, the first without names and the second named. They support their interpretation by saying that it is extremely unlikely that two sisters would have the same name. Those who argue for three women counter by saying that it is possible the two Marys had different fathers (in other words, Mary’s father died and her mother remained). If this was the case, then the two Marys would be what is called today step-sisters. Others point out that the term sister was commonly used at that time for close relatives (Hengstenberg cites “Tobit viii. 4, 7, vii. 4, compared with ver. 2; Job xlii.11” [presumably the LXX]). Still others believe the term “sister” (adelphe) really means “sister-in-law.” This view is somewhat forced in that a specific Greek word for “sister-in-law” (galoos) was available to John. The main argument for three women as opposed to four is based on the use of only two kai (and) conjunctions. If four women were in mind, readers in the original language would be expecting another “and” (kai) to be added. Against this argument, J. C. Ryle writes, “The objection that the word ‘and’ is omitted before ‘Mary the wife of Cleophas’ is worthless. In almost every catalogue of the Apostles the same omission may be noticed. (See Acts i. 13; Matt. x. 2; Luke vi. 14).” Fortunately, the number of women is not very important and does not affect any major doctrines.

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621 “After Jesus had spoken to them, after, as it were, he had bid them farewell, and the strange darkness fell over the land, the soldiers becoming alarmed, cleared the space about the cross, and John with the women and the other friends of Jesus (Luke 23:49) could stand only ‘afar off,’ watching for the end. This final watching ‘afar off’ the other evangelists note in their records” (R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel, 1291).
622 E. W. Hengstenberg, Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, 2:414. Hengstenberg says “that the Christian Church has from the beginning regarded them as three in number. Where, in the earlier Evangelists, a great number of women had been previously mentioned, and then individuals are specified, three, and never four, are alluded to in connection with the cross. Hence we may naturally expect that here also three, and not four are alluded to. Only on the supposition that Mary wife of Cleophas was the sister of our Lord’s mother, can we account for the postponement of Mary Magdalene, who everywhere else takes the first place among the women, as uniformly Simon Peter takes the first among the Apostles” (Ibid., 2:415-416).
623 The best grammatical argument for three women is found in R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel, 1291.
Regardless of whether one’s list has three or four women, the only women mentioned whose identification is certain are Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Our Lord’s mother’s sister has often been associated by commentators with “Salome” (Mk. 15:40) or “the mother of the sons of Zebedee” (Mt. 27:56). If true, this would make the apostles John and James (the sons of Zebedee) the cousins of Christ. Expositors are attracted to this interpretation because it helps explain why John and James are part of our Lord’s inner circle. All of this, however, is not provable and therefore just speculation. If Mary (the wife probably) of Clopas is not Mary’s sister, then we know nothing about her except that she was a dedicated disciple who was a friend of Jesus’ mother or Mary Magdalene. The attempt by commentators to connect Mary the wife of Clopas with the mother of James the less (Mk. 15:40; Mt. 27:56), the wife of Alphaeus (Mt. 10:3), is speculative. It is based on the assumption that with the exception of the mother of Jesus, the same persons appear in John as in Matthew and Mark.

Mary of Magdalene is first mentioned in the gospels in Luke 8:2. She is identified as “Mary called Magdalene out of whom had come seven demons.” Luke says that she was one of many who contributed to the Lord’s work (8:3). She apparently was named after her home town Magdala (from the Hebrew migdal meaning “watch tower”), a small town on the western side of the Sea of Galilee. She is very prominent toward the close of the gospels. She was at the crucifixion (Jn. 19:25; Mk. 15:40; Mt. 27:56; cf. Lk. 23:49). She stayed at the tomb and watched on the Saturday after the death of Jesus (Mk. 15:47; Mt. 27:61; cf. Lk. 23:55). She came early Sunday morning to see the tomb (Mt. 28:1) and anoint our Lord (Mk. 16:1). She was with the women (Joanna and Mary the mother of James and Salome) who first witnessed the empty tomb (Jn. 20:1; Lk. 24:1-8; Mk. 16:1-9; Mt. 28:1-8) and she was the first person to see the resurrected Christ (Mk. 16:9-10). The rather common notion that she was a converted prostitute or a woman of loose moral character before her conversion has absolutely no basis whatsoever in the text of Scripture; Mary of Magdalene figures prominently in the gospels because of her unceasing devotion and love toward the Savior. It was her love and courage (along with these other holy women) that placed her at the site of the crucifixion.

The mother of Christ was Mary, the wife of Joseph. (She was a widow by this time). After the birth narratives, infancy, and the brief incident at the Temple when Jesus was 12, she virtually disappears from the gospel narratives until we arrive at this incident. The fact that she came to the Passover feast in Jerusalem with the other believing women and was at the cross proves that she was a dedicated believer. It also fulfills the prophecy of the aged Simeon spoken at the presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple. He said to Mary, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed” (Lk. 2:34-35). Mary loved Jesus both as her son and as the Son of God. She wanted to be near Him during His final hours of suffering.

Interestingly, the women who stood with John near the cross are not wailing and throwing themselves on the ground in grief but are calm, self-controlled and quiet. They apparently have some understanding that the death of Jesus was unique and necessary. As terrible as the agony was, it was the will of God and was needed to save God’s people. These women are sad and perhaps are weeping quietly. However, their sorrow was mingled with faith and hope.
Our Lord’s Instructions to John and His Mother

Jesus, even in His agony on the cross, does not forget His responsibility toward His mother. As soon as He sees His mother He says, “‘Woman, behold your Son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold your Mother!’ And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home” (Jn. 19:26-27). As we look at these instructions we will examine the meaning of our Lord’s statement and the Roman Catholic perversion of this passage.

(1) The meaning of Christ’s statement is very simple. The Savior is telling His mother that, from now on, the apostle John is responsible to take care of her needs as an older widow. Jesus also tells John that he now bears responsibility to take Mary into his household and care for her as he would his own mother. To paraphrase, “Woman, see your son who now cares for you! Son, see your mother to be cared for by you!” As the firstborn son of Mary and Joseph, our Lord obeys the fifth commandment by honoring his mother. He magnifies and fulfills the moral law of God even as He hangs on the cross in agony.

The Redeemer’s statement raises two questions. First, why does Jesus address His mother as “Woman”? And second, why does Christ commit His mother to John and not to His own brothers according to the flesh? Regarding the first question, it is interesting that Jesus never addresses Mary as “Mother,” but always as “Woman.” This point does not at all mean that the Savior did not love, respect and honor his mother. He certainly did. But, He used the term “woman” to indicate to Mary that because He was the Messiah, the Son of God, Mary must always look upon Him first and foremost as Redeemer and Lord. The Mediator’s redemptive-spiritual relationship to Mary is far more important than their relationship according to the flesh. Further, the term “woman” is used because Christ knew that sin and superstition would lead people to place a supernatural honor on Mary as the mother of the Redeemer. Mary was “blessed among women” not over women. Her blessedness derives from believing in Jesus and obeying His word, not from simply carrying and having a baby. “[T]he Lord, through this name woman, would direct His mother into that love which knows Christ no more after the flesh (2 Cor. v. 16), and would also declare to us that in the midst of His work of atonement He felt Himself equally bound close to all sinners, and that He was not nearer to His mother than He was to thee and me.”

Jesus did not commend His mother to His brothers because at this time they were not yet believers (see Jn. 7:5; Mt. 12:47-50). The idea that the Savior did not have any brothers through Mary or that all references in Scripture to His brothers means cousins or close relatives is the legacy of Romanist exegesis. It is disproved by Matthew 13:54-56 where the Jews in our Lord’s hometown (Nazareth) compared the miracle-working Jesus to His ordinary brothers and sisters in an attempt to question the validity of His ministry. It would have been absurd for the inhabitants of Nazareth to compare Christ to His cousins. Further, the Word of God, in speaking prophetically of our Lord’s brothers, states explicitly that these brothers were Mary’s children not cousins. “I have become a stranger to my brothers, and an alien to my mother’s children” (Ps.

625 H. Shurmann as quoted in George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 350.
627 “As the firstborn of Mary, He had both the authority and responsibility, which would have devolved on her second son James. This automatic devolution was apparently undesirable, so our Lord used the authority He possessed as a dying criminal to commit her to the care of one whom He could trust—the Beloved Disciple” (F. W. Buckler, “Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachtani?” in The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures, Vol. LV, no. 4 [October, 1938], 387).
69:8). These brothers were not equipped spiritually at the time of the crucifixion to be Mary’s companions or guardians. Fortunately, however, God had mercy on these brothers; for after the resurrection of Jesus, only days after the ascension, we find them worshiping with the apostles and Mary (Ac. 1:14).

Interestingly, one can even discern a pattern in the Old Testament of believing parents being cared for by godly children, even when there were unbelieving or unfaithful children who were already (according to the flesh) first in line. “Abraham lived with Isaac and Jacob, not with Ishmael, or with his sons by Keturah. Isaac lived with Jacob, not Esau, and Jacob lived under the care and supervision of Joseph and therefore gave to Joseph a double portion by adopting Joseph’s two sons as heirs on equal terms with all his other sons (Gen. 48:5, 6).”628 For Bible-believing Christians, personal godliness and faithfulness to Jehovah are far more important than physical birth.

The New Testament epistles also teach that believing children and grandchildren should honor their progenitors. Paul writes, “If any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God” (1 Tim. 5:4). The fifth commandment is not just speaking about attitudes or words spoken to parents; it also applies to concrete acts of piety. A believer’s first religious duty toward his parents when they are old and feeble is to lovingly care for their physical and spiritual needs. Fairbairn comments,

The expression, to show piety (eusebien) to such, points back to the fifth commandment, in which the honouring of parents is placed in immediate connection with the reverence and homage due to God, and the things which most nearly concern His glory: that in youthful bosoms is the germ of fealty to God, and so its becoming exercise is reckoned a department of piety. To do this first, therefore, toward their own house, as having a prior claim even in comparison of what is due to the church or house of God, and to do it in the way of substantial ministrations of relief, which in such a case are but returns for similar ministrations formerly received (Matt. xv. 4-6), is acceptable before God; He regards it in a manner as done to Himself, and sees in it the earnest of future worth. The homes in which such reverential feelings are cherished, and such acts of lovingkindness are reciprocated, are the best nurseries of the church—churches themselves, indeed, in embryo, because the homes of Christian tenderness, holy affection, self-denying love, and fruitfulness in well-doing.629

The fact that our Lord turned the care of His believing mother over to a dedicated Christian instead of unbelieving relatives teaches us something important about the church and the family. It teaches that one’s faith in Christ takes precedence over family or blood relations. All professing Christians must take great care not to place covenant children or aged believing parents in the hands of unbelieving caretakers. To do so, is to deliberately place that person in spiritual danger by forcing them to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-18). This principle applies as much to the heathen state (“public”) school as it does to the unchristian and uncaring pagan nursing facility. We must follow the Savior’s example by making the spiritual care of loved ones a top priority. Christians must reject the paternalism of the welfare state and make the necessary sacrifices to biblically care for those that God has made their responsibility. When professing Christians hand their children or believing parents over to

629 Patrick Fairbairn, Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1874] 1956), 195.
the heathen to save money or for the sake of convenience, they are committing a serious sin worthy of censure by the church of Christ. As Paul says, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8). The apostle “asserts in the most emphatic manner the obligations springing out of family relationships, as grounded in the constitution of nature, and, so far from being annulled or relaxed by the gospel, [are] only rendered the more sacred and imperatively binding.”

(2) Given the current resurgence and popularity of the Roman Catholic Church in America we would do well to briefly consider the Romanist perversion of John 19:26-27. The Papal church for many centuries has used this passage to argue that John as the representative of all Christians was placed by Jesus directly under the spiritual care of Mary. In other words, Mary is the mother of all believers. She is the new Eve who gives birth to and watches over the church as co-mediatrix with Christ. The Romanist popularizer Bishop Fulton J. Sheen writes, “When our Lord spoke of John, he did not refer to him as John for then he would have been only the son of Zebedee. Rather in him all humanity was commended to Mary, who became the mother of men, not by metaphor, or figure of speech, but by pangs of birth.” In a similar vein the Roman Catholic scholar Raymond E. Brown remarks, “If Mary was refused a role during the ministry of Jesus as it began at Cana, she finally received her role in the hour of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection…. In becoming the mother of the Beloved Disciple (the Christian) Mary is symbolically evocative of Lady Zion who, after the birth pangs, brings forth anew people in joy (John 16:21; Isa. 49:22; 54:1; 66:7-11).”

Does this passage support the gross Mariolatry of the Papal church as many Romanist scholars claim? No, not at all! Such an idea is unbiblical and absurd for the following reasons. First, the text makes it very clear that Mary is placed under John’s care and authority, not the other way around. There is not a trace or even a hint of the doctrine that Mary is a mother and patroness to all the saints. As a middle-aged widow, she is the one who needs economic, physical and spiritual care, not the young, vibrant apostle who was part owner of a prosperous fishing business. Roman Catholic expositors are guilty of eisegetically reading their own perverted human traditions about Mary into the text.

Second, Romanist scholars who see in John the representative of all disciples because he is called “the disciple whom He loved” instead of John fail to take into consideration that out of modesty and a desire for objectivity in the narrative, John never calls himself John in his gospel (see Jn. 13:23; 19:26ff.; 20:2-10; 21:7-23; 21:24). Therefore, John is not making some veiled theological point by the expression “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” He is simply being modest.

Third, a careful examination of the New Testament demonstrates that Mary did not have any special role or authority in the church of Christ. In Acts 1:14 Mary is observed at prayer with other believers and is never mentioned again except for the expression “born of a woman” in Galatians 4:4. The only mother of the church mentioned in Scripture is the “Jerusalem above” (Gal. 4:26) where Christ rules, sends out the Spirit of His grace and intercedes for His people. There is nothing in Scripture about a “queen of heaven” or “mediatrix.” If Mary were ruling

630 Patrick Fairbairn, Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, 197.
633 Raymond E. Brown, as quoted in George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 349.
alongside the exalted Mediator, then her unique role would be emphasized or at least mentioned in God’s Word. But it is not because it is an invention of sinful man. Furthermore, the New Testament explicitly forbids women to teach or exercise authority over men in the church (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-12).

The text before us is strong proof “that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was never meant to be honored as divine, or to be prayed to, worshipped, and trusted in, as the friend of sinners. Common sense points out that she who needed the care and protection of another, was never likely to help men and women to heaven, or to be in any sense a mediator between God and man! It is not too much to say, however painful the assertion, that of all inventions of the Church of Rome, there never was one more utterly devoid of foundation, both in Scripture and reason, than the doctrine of Mary-worship.”

Chapter 17: The Three Hours of Darkness

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” That is to say, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, “This man calleth for Elias” And straightway one of them ran, and took a spunge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink. The rest said, “Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.” (Mt. 27:45-49)

And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is, being interpreted, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” And some of them that stood by, when they heard it, said, “Behold, he calleth Elias.” And one ran and filled a spunge full of vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink, saying, “Let alone; let us see whether Elias will come to take him down.” (Mk. 15:33-36)

And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. (Lk. 23:44-45)

When we come to the three hours of darkness on the cross we encounter the second phase and climax of Christ’s suffering. From around nine in the morning until noon, Jesus endured the spikes in the hands and feet. As time passed His wounds became swollen and inflamed. The flies are feasting on His torn and bleeding flesh. His blood struggles to circulate in His hanging, artificially extended body. Fever, severe headache and exhaustion grip the Savior. He struggles to breathe properly and must pull on His inflamed wounds to catch a full breath of air. As He struggles on the cross, however, He is active. He opens paradise for the penitent criminal and He

634 J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:330. R. C. H. Lenski comments, “Alas, what has Roman Catholicism made of this scene! Some of it is like blasphemy of Christ in the very hour of his atoning death. Catholic books are full of this derogation of Christ and the exaltation of Mary. We are told that with her passion Mary comes to the aid of her son on the cross. Alone he could not have accomplished the task; he could never have borne the sins of the world and made atonement for them by himself. ‘The Mother of God’ had to cooperate with the Son of God. This summarizes the Catholic teaching. It invents two mediators where God only had one. It robs Christ in order to deify and to glorify Mary. In doing this blasphemous thing it destroys the real atonement and invents another which does not atone. Simply to state these facts is to abhor them. There is one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, I Tim. 2:5, 6” (The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel, 1297).
assigns His beloved mother to John the apostle. During this time He is assaulted by the Jewish people, the leaders of Israel and the satanic hosts. He is tempted, mocked, hated and abused. But all of this suffering in body and soul is nothing compared to what lies ahead. He must now enter the essence of the sacrifice itself. He must step into the outer darkness of the full eclipse of the Father’s fellowship, friendship and love. The darkness indicates that this is a crucifixion like no other in history. In the three hours of blackness, the Savior suffers not merely at the hands of wicked men who are used of God to vicariously punish the innocent Redeemer, but now, as it were, the Father unsheathes His sword of judgment and plunges it into the heart of His dear Son. It is this aspect of the Mediator’s suffering that is mysterious and in a sense is unfathomable to finite creatures. There are a number of things to note regarding this period of darkness.

The darkness which lasted from twelve noon to three o’clock was supernatural and caused by the immediate power of God. All attempts to explain this darkness by means of natural phenomena have failed. Some have argued that the darkness was caused by an eclipse. This thought is easily refuted by the fact that Passover occurs during a full moon. Therefore, the earth is closer to the sun than the moon, rendering an eclipse on the earth impossible. Others have attempted to explain this darkness by means of a severe dust storm referred to as a “black sirocco.” Yet, we see nothing in the text referring to wind or dust. Still others have suggested that a thick cloud cover must have rolled in. The problem with this and other such explanations is that this darkness was clearly intended to be a sign from God. While “natural phenomena” may be explained as a strange coincidence, a sign from God is intended to cause shock and awe in those present precisely because it goes beyond ordinary providence. Further, Luke indicates how just dark and unusual this darkness was by the statement, “then the sun was darkened” (23:45) or literally in Greek, “the sun failing.” Between twelve noon and three o’clock, when the sun normally was at its strongest and brightest, it became as dark as night or perhaps even darker. Without question this darkness was intense, sobering and unforgettable.

This period of darkness raises a few pertinent questions. First, did the darkness cover only the land of Palestine or the whole lighted side of the earth? The Greek word used by all the synoptics (εἰς ἡράρχησιν) can be translated as “ground, land” (thus referring to a region or country) or as the “earth” (i.e. the whole earth). Most commentators believe that, like the supernatural darkness that covered Egypt (Ex. 10:22), this darkness was probably limited to the land of Judea. Other scholars believe that the whole earth was darkened because Luke says the sun’s light failed. If this statement is not a figure of speech, then obviously the whole earth would be darkened. Whatever position one holds, one must not forget that all the evangelists emphasize that “all the land” (Mt. 27:45; Lk. 23:44) or the “whole land” (Mk. 15:33) was darkened. Some scholars who prefer the interpretation that the darkness was limited to the Middle East point out that there are no records in any nations outside of Israel of darkness during the day in the spring of A.D. 29. “There seems no necessity for supposing that the darkness extended beyond Palestine. Our Lord’s ministry was specially directed to Israel, and the land of Israel was the land to which all miracles connected with His life and death were confined.”

Second, did the darkness appear suddenly or was it a gradual occurrence? “Some think that the darkness set in gradually, then grew deeper up to a certain point, and slowly receded after that. The evangelists offer no support for this view.”

When it came time for Christ to enter the final stage of His sacrifice—the peak of His suffering and separation from the Father—God turned the light off over the nation of Israel.

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This supernatural darkness was rich in meaning for the crucified Messiah as well as the people of Israel. Although the immediate context does not define the purpose or meaning of the darkness, the Scriptures use darkness to describe a number of things associated with judgment.

First, darkness was a common metaphor for God’s judgment against nations for sin. In Exodus 10:22-23 Jehovah literally darkened the land of Egypt to punish its leaders and people for refusing to obey God’s voice by letting the children of Israel go to serve Him. When God described the curses that accompany blatant disobedience to His commandments He said, “And you shall grope at noon day, as a blind man gropes in the darkness” (Dt. 28:29). When Jehovah spoke judgment to unfaithful Israel through Isaiah He declared, “In that day they will roar against them…. And if one looks to the land, behold darkness and sorrow; and the light is darkened by the clouds” (5:30). In Isaiah 13:9-10 God described His coming judgment against Babylon in terms of darkness, “Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He will destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine.” When Jeremiah prophesied regarding the destruction of Judah he said, “She [Judah] has breathed her last; her sun has gone down while it was yet day” (15:9). Amos prophesied that Jehovah will cause the sun to become darkened at noon, darkening the earth in broad daylight (8:9). This is a terrifying sign of God’s wrath against Israel. The day of the Lord will not be a day of light, but of darkness (Amos 5:18-20; cf. Ezek. 32:7-8; Isa. 34:4-5; Joel 2:28-32). Our Lord used the same darkness terminology to describe the coming destruction of Israel by the Romans in A.D. 70 (Mt. 24:29; Mk. 13:24; Lk. 21:25).

This familiar Old Testament motif demonstrates that darkness, whether literal or figurative, represents God’s displeasure and judgment against sin. To those who are guilty of unrepentant sin, darkness means the wrath of God. It means terror, despair, fear, sorrow, pain and death. Even the heathen understood that darkness was a sign of impending disaster. “Philo spoke of a supernatural eclipse of the sun or moon as signifying ‘either the death of kings or the destruction of cities’ (De Providential II. 50).”

When God imputed the sins of the elect upon the Savior on the cross, the land descended into darkness because the cup of God’s wrath was poured out onto the Messiah. The Redeemer was paying the ultimate price for the sins of His people. He was giving His life as “a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45; cf. Mt. 20:28; 26:28). The judgment, terror, suffering and punishment that we would have endured on the final, terrible great day of the Lord, the last day of history, was concentrated and placed on Jesus in the space of a few hours. That deep darkness accompanied the horror of great darkness which the blessed Surety experienced spiritually while He atoned for the sins of the world. “When earth denied him a drop of cold water, heaven denied him a beam of light; having to deliver us from utter darkness, he did himself, in the depth of His sufferings, walk in darkness, and had no light, Isa. 1. 10.”

Second, darkness is often used to describe hell. Our Lord said, “Cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 25:30; cf. Ps. 107:10-11). Jude says that the place reserved for the wicked is “the blackness of darkness forever” (1:13). The wicked suffer torment in the flames of hell, yet they do so in totally black, terrifying darkness. “Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness, in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 22:13).

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638 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:428.
On that day almost two thousand years ago, Christ entered the darkness of hell. He took
upon Himself the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13) and was enveloped by the passion of hell. On the
cross there was no light of love, no light of comfort, no light of peace and no light of friendship
and fellowship with God. He hung on the gibbet in darkness, judicially under the curse of God,
abandoned to the darkness of hell. “The darkness in which Christ now hung suspended accused
to Him, impinged upon Him, in that second of time in which His sorrow became so aggravated
that it finally had to give expression to the statement: ‘My God, My God, why hast Thou
forsaken me?’ He was suffering the pains of hell.” This darkness meant judgment, the
judgment of God upon our sins. This punishment was borne by Jesus, so that he, as our
Substitute, suffered most intense agony, indescribable woe, terrible isolation or forsakenness.
Hell came to Calvary that day, and the Savior descended into it and bore its horrors in our
stead. “God thrust His only begotten Son into the dark. He must experience what is meant by
the term ‘outer darkness.’ This was one of His own teachings: outer, extreme, darkness, a
darkness unknown on earth…. Today He must experience it, and the experience of darkness
demands a medium of darkness.”

Third, darkness refers to that which is opposed to Jehovah: “God is light and in Him is no
darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5). Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil
(Jn. 3:20). Those who continue in sin and do not submit to Christ are the children of darkness (1
Th. 5:5). They are full of darkness and dwell in darkness because they do not obey God’s Word
(Ps. 82:5; 107:10-11). Our Lord said to the apostate leaders of Israel when they came to arrest
Him, “[T]his is your hour, and the power of darkness” (Lk. 22:53). When Jesus hung on the
cross, the day turned into night for the greatest evil ever committed on this earth was done. The
demons and the enemies of God gained an apparent triumph and darkness appeared for a time to
have victory over light. “Now the prince of this world, and his forces, the rulers of the darkness
of this world, were to be cast out, to be spoiled and vanquished; and to make his victory the more
illustrious, he fights them on their own ground; gives them all the advantage they could have
against him by this darkness, lets them take the wind and sun, and yet baffles them, and so
becomes more than a conqueror.” The Savior had to enter the outer darkness in order to
vanquish the forces of darkness.

Fourth, this period of amazing darkness was also designed to shock the nation of Israel.
When the darkness fell over the land, the nation of Israel became fearful and silent. For a time
the blasphemers shut their mouths in horror. God attended the crucifixion and death of Jesus with
special signs so the Jews would consider the meaning and importance of the death of Christ. As
Ryle notes,

It was meet and right that the attention of all around Jerusalem should be arrested in a
marked way, when the great sacrifice for sin was being offered and the Son of God was dying.
There were signs and wonders wrought in the sight of all Israel, when the law was given on
Sinai. There were signs and wonders in like manner when the atoning blood of Christ was shed
on Calvary. There was a sign for an unbelieving world. The darkness at mid-day was a miracle
which would compel men to think.—There was a sign for the professing Church and the
ministers of the temple. The rending of the veil which hung between the holy place and the holy

639 Klaas Schilder, Christ Crucified, 373.
641 Klaas Schilder, Christ Crucified, 378.
642 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:428.
of holies, was a miracle which would strike awe into the heart of every priest and Levite in Jewry.

Signs like these, on special occasions, let us remember, are a part of God’s ways in dealing with man. He knows the desperate stupidity and unbelief of human nature. He sees it necessary to arouse our attention by miraculous works, when He brings in a new dispensation. He thus compels men to open their eyes whether they will or no, and to hear His voice for a little season. He has done so frequently in the days that are past. He did so when He gave the law. He did so in the passage before us when He brought in the Gospel. He will do so once more when Christ comes again the second time. He will show a sneering, unbelieving world that He can suspend the laws of nature at His pleasure, and alter the framework of creation as easily as He called the earth into being. 643

Although it is clear that the darkness pointed men to the sacrificial death of Christ, it may also have had a secondary meaning for the hardened reprobates of Israel (i.e. those who rejected the Messiah and crucified the Son of God). God had sent a plague of darkness upon Egypt before the first Passover as a sign that a divine curse rested upon the land (cf. Ex. 10:21ff.). Perhaps this darkness was also a sign of God’s displeasure and wrath with Israel for murdering the author of life. Jehovah was telling the leaders and apostate nation that He would utterly destroy Israel. He was going to turn off their lights.

Chapter 18: The Cry of Abandonment

The darkness over the land serves as the visible context or backdrop to the Savior’s cry of dereliction. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34). Jesus had been hanging on the cross for almost six hours. During the physical tortures He had not uttered one word of pain, suffering or anguish. Even during His soul agonies, with the exception of Gethsemane, He had quietly and patiently endured virtually every variety of inward agony which a sinless soul could experience. But now near the time of His death He cries out to His God. This cry of abandonment marks the period which is the climax of our Lord’s suffering. This is the period of His mysterious agony because of the desertion of His Father. It was during this time, the time of darkness and silence “that He suffered the withdrawment of all sensible tokens of his Father’s love; the suspension of every kind of sensible support, of every display of divine complacency; the felt manifestation of God’s righteous displeasure at sin; the total eclipse of the hallowed light which had formerly cheered him amid the deepest gloom; the paternal desertion which drew from him the deep groan of bereavement, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.’” 644 Regarding this cry of abandonment Spurgeon writes,

I do not think that the records of time, or even of eternity, contain a sentence more full of anguish. Here the wormwood and the gall, and all the other bitterness are undone. Here you may look as into a vast abyss; and though you strain your eyes, and gaze till sight fails you, yet you perceive no bottom; it is measureless, unfathomable, inconceivable. This anguish of the

Saviour on your behalf and mine is no more to be measured and weighed than the sin which
needed it, or the love which endured it. We will adore where we cannot comprehend.  

As we examine this mysterious and difficult section of Scripture we will consider: (1)
preliminary comments regarding our Lord’s cry of abandonment; (2) the significance of this
cry in the overall context of Scripture; (3) the meaning of this cry to Jesus on the cross; and (4)
what we must learn from this cry that will affect our daily lives.

(1) There are a number of things about this cry of dereliction that need to be noted before
we go deeper into its meaning and significance. First, both Matthew and Mark quote the words in
transliterated Hebrew/Aramaic and then give the Greek translation. In Mark’s account the
statement is in Aramaic, our Lord’s everyday language; while in Matthew’s version the Hebrew
“Eli” is used, “My God,” followed by the Aramaic words for “Why have You forsaken Me?”
The use of the original tongue probably sets up the misunderstanding in Matthew 27:47-49 and
Mark 15:35-36 regarding Elijah.

Second, our Lord deliberately quotes from the Scriptures regarding His suffering, Psalm
22:1. Jesus expressed his agony using the Word of God not only as a testimony to Himself as a
fulfillment of the Scriptures, but also to direct us in prayer. The Psalms are not only the church’s
hymn book, but also a supreme guide as to how and when to pray.

We must not forget that the cry of abandonment was indeed a prayer unto God. The
Savior, even in His deepest agony and humiliation, does not waiver in the least. Even as He
carries upon Himself the imputed sin of the whole world, He faithfully looks to God. Even from
the abyss of the forsakenness of His Father, He reaches out in prayer. The Mediator’s perfect
obedience, His love of the Scriptures and His habit of prayer do not diminish on the cross. “The
Savior’s outcry is not against God, but to God. ‘My God, my God’: He makes a double effort to
draw near. True Sonship is here. The child in the dark is crying after his Father—‘My God, my
God.’ Both the Bible and prayer were dear to Jesus in his agony.”

Interestingly, we see that the whole passion narrative is bracketed by
the prayers of Jesus
that are the response to agony. At the beginning of the passion narrative in Gethsemane (Mk.
14:33-36; Mt. 26:36-39; Lk. 22:41-44) and here only moments before His death (Mk. 15:34; Mt.
27:46), our Lord cries out with faith, love and obedience to His Father. This reality completely
eliminates any idea that the Son had a crisis of faith while on the cross. That Jesus humbly
bowed the knee to His Father and refused to quarrel with His lot as the sin-bearer can be seen in
the words of covenant love, “My God, my God.” The Savior was “obedient to the point of death,
even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:8). This means that the Mediator’s obedience to God
extended through the whole period of His life even throughout His suffering on the cross. “He
does not ask that the forsaking may end prematurely, he would only understand anew its
meaning. He does not shrink, but rather dedicates himself anew to God by the words, ‘My God,
my God,’ and by seeking to review the ground and reason of that anguish which he is resolute to
bear even to the bitter end.”

Anyone who understands anything of the piety nurtured by the Scriptures will understand
our Lord’s citation of the Bible in His time of suffering. “Pious people in anxious moments of
life almost naturally quote the Scriptures. There are many of those who pray, and who, when
they reach the strongest feeling in prayer, immediately start using the phraseology of the

647 Ibid, 36:139.
Bible…. Whoever lives in the Scriptures, will, precisely in moments of great stress as in moments of great joy, speak in quotations.⁶⁴⁸ The Savior lived a life saturated with the sacred Scriptures and prayer. Therefore, His natural and habitual response to trials and suffering was to pray and take refuge in God’s Word. By His holy sinless example Christ recommends “to us the use of scripture—expressions in prayer, which will help out infirmities.”⁶⁴⁹

Third, both Mark and Matthew emphasize that Christ cried out or shouted His petition. “Jesus shouted with a great voice.” The word (eboesen from boaw) translated “cried out” is a strong word indicating that our Lord very loudly cried out these words. This would have been a very dramatic and shocking scene. Out of the darkness and silence comes a loud pronounced cry of anguish. The unexpected shout would have startled the people who were at the crucifixion.

This loud cry of anguish is significant because it demonstrates that the dying Savior was in full possession of His faculties. Normally a person crucified would gradually lose his strength. Often the person would become delirious and would eventually lose consciousness. But even after nearly six hours on the cross, Jesus’ mind is clear and sharp. With His sinless, alert mind, He experiences the wrath of God against sin. The loud cry also demonstrates the great earnestness of His prayer. This petition came from the heart of Christ, a heart severely pained by the loss of communion and fellowship with His Father. Of all the things which tormented the Savior on the cross, nothing compared with the suffering of His soul which flowed from the temporary abandonment by God. Our Lord’s perfect sinless human nature, which from the very moment of conception had experienced a perfect relationship with God, experienced a spiritual shock by this forsakenness. This agonizing shock is unfathomable. Of all the pain and suffering in this world and even in hell, nothing approaches the soul pain and heartache that the Redeemer suffered on the cross.

Fourth, our Lord’s prayer is set forth in the form of a question: “Why or for what purpose did You forsake Me?” The petition is not a complaint, nor is Jesus quarreling with God. The soul of the Savior, under the terribleness of divine wrath and the unimaginable pain of the abandonment of the Father’s fellowship, cries out for an explanation. Does this question mean that Christ did not know the answer to this question? According to Scripture He most certainly did. He knew that He would be a sacrifice for sin and He knew all that that involved intellectually. But, when He experienced the darkness and horror of it and could sense that God was against Him as a sin offering, His soul shuddered. It cried out from the darkness. Thus, this loud cry was one of love, faith and affirmation, not one of anger or alienation. “The cry of dereliction expressed the unfathomable pain of real abandonment by the Father.”⁶⁵⁰ “Whenever natural sense does miss the consolations of God, faith must grip more straitly to God, as Christ’s faith does here, crying, My God, my God, when sense sees nothing but forsaking.”⁶⁵¹

(2) The significance and reason of the abandonment of Christ by the Father is taught throughout Scripture. Once we understand the nature of God; the heinousness, consequences or penalty of sin; and the fact that Jesus took upon Himself the sin and liability of punishment for the elect; the necessity of the abandonment becomes clear. The Bible teaches that God is perfectly righteous (Zeph. 3:5; Dt. 32:4; Ps. 89:14; 1 Jn. 1:5; Gen. 18:25; Rom. 2:5-6; 9:14). Therefore, God has an intrinsic hatred of sin; His whole being reacts against it (Ps. 5:4-6; Nah. 1:2; Rom. 1:18). Consequently, God in accordance with His own nature and character must

⁶⁴⁸ Klaas Schilder, Christ Crucified, 395.
⁶⁴⁹ Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:428.
⁶⁵¹ David Dickson, Matthew, 398.
punish sin (Ex. 23:7; 34:7; Num. 14:18; Nah. 1:3; Rom. 2:5-6). Jehovah is also infinitely holy (Ex. 15:11; Lev. 11:44; Isa. 6:3; Hab. 1:13; Ps. 5:4-5; Rev. 4:8). As a result God hates “all workers of iniquity” (Ps. 5:4-5). He cannot dwell with sinners (Hab. 1:13). He will not have any fellowship with sinners (1 Jn. 1:5-6) and will not ever look upon evil.

The moral law of God, which is a reflection of God’s nature and character, teaches that the penalty for sin is death (Gen. 2:17; Dt. 27:36; Ezek. 18:20; Rom. 1:18, 32; 6:23; Jas. 1:15; Rev. 20:14-15). Death refers to spiritual death or separation from God (i.e. the loss of favor, fellowship, friendship and communion); physical death; and the lake of fire or the second death (Rev. 20:14). When Adam ate the forbidden fruit and sinned against God, he was not immediately killed; but, he was expelled from the garden because he died spiritually even though his physical body was still alive (Gen. 2:17; 23-24; Rom. 5:12-19). He was separated from God. The fellowship that he had prior to his sin was broken. He suffered the necessary consequence of sin. As Paul says, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). The person who sins brings upon himself real guilt and liability of punishment. “For it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them’” (Gal. 3:10; cf. Rev. 20:15).

Because of God’s righteous and holy character, which cannot change, and the penalty of the law, which is based on God’s nature and thus is immutable, the only way that Jesus could eliminate the guilt and penalty of sin was to endure the full penalty in the place of the believing sinner. Since a crucial aspect of the penalty for sin was a loss of fellowship with God or spiritual death, Christ had to experience the abandonment of the Father on the cross. Keep in mind, the essence of spiritual death is separation from God. The Savior had to experience the damnation of God and thus He experienced the abandonment that sin deserves. “The sacrifice for sin must be put in the place of separation, and must bow to the penalty of death. By this placing of the Great Sacrifice under forsaking and death, it would be seen by all creatures throughout the universe that God would not have fellowship with sin. If even the Holy One, who stood the Just for the unjust, found God forsaking him, what must the doom of the actual sinner be! Sin is always, in every case, a dividing influence, putting even the Christ himself, as a sin bearer, in the place of distance.”

Jesus was abandoned by God on the cross because the only way that God could remain perfectly just or righteous, and justify or declare righteous those who believe in Christ, was to punish the Savior fully for their sins (cf. Rom. 3:21-28). Jesus so closely identified Himself with the elect sinners by taking upon Himself the imputed sins of the world that He had to experience the real horror of hell and separation from God that real sin deserves. “It is as perfect man that He has assured communion with the Father, unbroken save for that terrible moment of darkness upon the Cross, when, that He might be wholly one with man even in man’s sin He knew the full horror of the loneliness which man has made for himself.”

(3) The significance and meaning of this separation for Christ is a difficult topic that merits our careful attention. There are a number of areas to consider. First, we will consider some common errors related to the separation that our Lord experienced on the cross. As we examine these errors we will sharpen our understanding of what actually occurred.

a) One error that has arisen regarding the separation is that it involved a mysterious, inexplicable rupture between God the Father and the divine nature of Christ. This view

apparently arose out of a desire to honor the doctrine of the hypostatic union of the two natures (divine and human) in one person (Jesus Christ) and thus avoid the accusation of Nestorianism (i.e. the heretical doctrine that the Savior was two persons and not one). The problem with this view is that the unity of the trinity cannot be broken because it is unbreakable. The persons within the godhead could no more be separated than could God cease to exist or change in His divine Being.

The Bible teaches that God is immutable. That is, God is not subject to any change in His Being, attributes or perfections. The “immutability of God is clearly taught in such passages of Scriptures as Ex. 3:14; Ps. 102:26-28; Isa. 41:4; 48:12; Mal. 3:6; Rom. 1:23; Heb. 1:11, 12; Jas. 1:17. The incarnation brought no change in the Being or perfections of God, nor in His purpose, for it was His eternal good pleasure to send the Son of His love into the world.”

Further, God the Father and God the Son are not two separate beings different from each other as Jack Jones and John Smith. But, rather, they are two persons of one substance; God the Father and Jesus Christ are one (Jn. 10:30). Even while the Savior walked the earth, the eternal Son was in the bosom of the Father (Jn. 1:18). Therefore, all concepts of a division between God the Father and God the Son are erroneous. Scripture cannot contradict Scripture.

b) Another more common error regarding the separation is that God the Father ceased loving Jesus while He was on the cross. Isaiah tells us what God thinks of Christ. The Father calls Him “My Elect One in whom My soul delights” (42:1). When the Savior was baptized by John, God publicly and audibly declared, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17). On the mount of transfiguration once again the Father said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 17:5). “In the quiet recess of eternity the Son was the object of the Father’s inexhaustible delight (cf. Prov. 8:30). The former’s re-affirmation, by means of baptism, of his purpose to shed his blood for a world lost in sin did nothing to diminish that love.”

God loved Jesus for who He was and He loved the Mediator for His redemptive obedience. Our Lord said, “Therefore, My Father loves Me, because I lay down My Life that I may take it up again” (Jn. 10:17; 5:20). Obviously, the Savior’s coming into the world to die on the cross for the sheep is something approved of and greatly loved by the Father. God so loved Christ’s sacrifice of Himself that He rewarded Him with “all authority over heaven and earth” (Mt. 28:18). The Redeemer even prays that God would love the elect as He has loved the Son (Jn. 17:23-26).

When Jesus hung on the cross, God did not stop loving Him but rather withdrew the active exhibition and all sensible tokens of that love. Similarly, when a total eclipse of the sun causes the earth to reside in a deep darkness, the sun is still shining in all its strength. God loved the Son and loved His obedience on the cross. But, because of the sin that was put on Christ, God had to forsake Him. Every display of divine love was withheld. This reality is hard for our finite minds to fathom. Normally, when God judges the sinner there is a holy hatred of both the sin and the sinner (Ps. 5:5; 45:7; Rev. 2:6, 15). But, in the case of the Redeemer, the person being punished for sin was Himself completely sinless (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22). Therefore,

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656 “Truly the Only Begotten was never more lovely to the Father than when he was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross! But we must look upon God here as the Judge of all the earth, and we must look upon the Lord Jesus also in his official capacity, as the Surety of the covenant, and the Sacrifice for sin. The great Judge of all cannot smile upon him who has become the substitute for the guilty. Sin is loathed of God; and if, in order to its removal, his own Son is made to bear it, yet, it is still loathsome, and he who bears it cannot be in happy communion with God. This was the dread necessity of expiation” (Charles H. Spurgeon, “Lama Sabachthani,” 36:140).
the withholding of the Father’s active love of Jesus while He was on the cross was purely judicial. The Father had to turn His face away from the Son because He was a substitute for sinners. “Christ was made Sin for us, a Curse for us; and therefore, though God loved him as a Son, he frowned upon him as a Surety.” 657 “The fire of Heaven consumed the sacrifice. The tremendous manifestation of God’s displeasure against sin He endured, though in him was no sin.” 658

Second, the separation of Jesus involved both positive and negative elements. Negatively, it involved the withdrawal or eclipse of the Father’s active love, fellowship, support and comfort of Christ. The Savior who had been and continued to be perfectly sinless and obedient to the covenant; who had enjoyed a fellowship and communion with God that no one had experienced; whose very life and existence involved a blessed unity of relationship with the Father had all of this turned upside down. “Throughout His life Christ felt this relationship, and this union, this fellowship with God. It blessed Him, it gave the blessing, it colored and determined the blessing, it was the blessing. ‘Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard. But I knew that Thou didst always hear’ (John 11).” 659

But on the cross the perfect covenant keeper, the One who always delighted to do the Father’s will (Heb. 10:7; cf. Jn. 8:26; 10:25), is regarded judicially as a covenant breaker. Therefore the blessed fellowship and communion had to be cut off. “He is sinless and trustful, and yet he has an overpowering feeling that God is absent from him.” 660 He has drifted into the spiritual abyss, the unimaginable region behind the back of God. “In proportion as he is more fitted to receive the love of the great Father, in that proportion is his pining after it the more intense. As a Son, he is more able to commune with God than ever a servant angel could be; and now that he is forsaken of God, the void within is the greater, and the anguish more bitter.” 661

Only a day before when Jesus had predicted that the disciples would be scattered He took comfort with these words: “You will be scattered each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me” (Jn. 16:32). Our Lord knew that the sense of God’s presence is the greatest source of comfort for believers. He knew that the saints could endure the severest trials and darkest times with God’s comforting fellowship. But when darkness enveloped the land and the Savior suffered as a substitute for sinners, He was forsaken of God. When the Redeemer came to Gethsemane and began to contemplate the cup of God’s wrath and this forsakenness, He fell on the ground in soul shock and pleaded with the Father. After He prayed, God sent unto Him a comforting angel to strengthen Him. But on Golgotha there would be no comforting angels, only the sense of abandonment. There was a total eclipse of the comforting love of God. The Father (figuratively speaking) had to turn His back to His beloved Son. “In responding to the call to the wilderness and identifying himself completely with sinners, Jesus offered himself to bear the judgment of God on human rebellion…. Now on the cross he who had lived wholly for the Father experienced the full alienation from God which the judgment he had assumed entailed. His cry expresses the profound horror of separation from God.” 662

657 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:429.
658 William Symington, On the Atonement and Intercession of Jesus Christ, 152.
659 Klaas Schilder, Christ Crucified, 407.
661 Ibid.
662 William L. Lane, The Gospel of Mark, 573. Mathew Henry writes, “That Christ’s being forsaken of His Father was the most grievous of his sufferings, and that which he complained most of. Here he laid the most doleful accents: he did not say, ‘Why am I scourged? And why spit upon? And why nailed to the cross?’ Nor did he say to
It is impossible for us to understand the pain and suffering that Jesus felt at this time because we are sinners and Christ was perfect. “What our Surety suffered in his soul must ever surpass all our powers of description or conception...we have the best reason to suppose that every variety of inward agony which a sinless spirit can possibly feel was experienced by him.”

“Our sins deserved that we should be utterly forsaken of God, for it behooved our Redeemer to taste...the hell of being forsaken ere we should be redeemed.”

Positively, the Savior’s abandonment involved suffering the torments of hell. God’s holy wrath against sin was poured out on Christ as He hung on the cross. Jehovah’s fury was burning itself out in the very heart of Jesus. Our Lord’s sufferings were not the same in all respects as the sufferings of the damned in hell because subjectively, or personally, He was sinless. He could not feel any remorse, regret, total despair or the fury of evil passions. The ungodly in hell are continuously tormented with unrestrained and unfulfilled sinful lusts. Their minds are continuously tormented by personal guilt and they are continually thinking “What if...”? As a Lamb without spot or blemish, the holy Savior could not experience that aspect of hell.

The Redeemer suffered the pain of hell for imputed sin (i.e. the elect’s sin, guilt and liability of punishment were reckoned to His account). Therefore, the agonies He suffered in His soul were different, yet not any less severe. While He could not experience hell as a personal sinner, who had wasted his life and had an eternity of regrets and despair, nevertheless as a sinless substitute there were aspects of His suffering that go beyond what a real sinner could experience. Because of His perfect holiness and His perfect relationship with the Father, God’s displeasure against sin pierced His heart far more than it would in a reprobate who had never really experienced God’s love. His acute sense of the Father’s holy hatred of the imputed sin that was upon Him; His extreme sensitivity to every aspect of the Father’s wrath and fury against sin; His holy knowledge of the vileness and heinousness of the sin reckoned to Him must have produced in Jesus a feeling of extreme sorrow and distress. Fallen men, whose moral sense is impaired by the pollution of sin, cannot comprehend the soul shock and agony that Christ endured in the outer darkness. Symington writes, “As such a feeling would accrue from the purity and ardour of his love to God and holiness, acting in his perfectly peculiar circumstances; so it would be increased by the pity and tenderness which he ever felt towards the objects of his redeeming love. A wise and good father is more deeply distressed by a crime which his beloved child has perpetrated, than by the same offense if committed by an indifferent person.” It is this suffering which makes the sacrifice of Christ perfect and efficacious.

his disciples, when they turned their back upon him, ‘Why have ye forsaken me?’ But when his Father stood at a distance, he cried out thus; for this was it that put wormwood and gall into the affliction and misery. This brought the waters in to the soul, Ps. lxix. 1-3.” (Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:429).

663 William Symington, On the Atonement and Intercession of Christ, 150.
664 David Dickson, Matthew, 398.
665 William Symington, On the Atonement and Intercession of Christ, 152. B. B. Warfield, in his excellent study of the “Emotional Life of Our Lord,” points out that Jesus came in “the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. 8:3; i.e. the body and soul of unfallen man) because He had to suffer true human emotions under the curse of sin and judgment: “It is germane to our inquiry, therefore, to take note of the fact that among the emotions which are attested as having found place in our Lord’s life-experiences, there are those which belong to him not as man but as sin-bearer, which never would have invaded his soul in the purity of his humanity save as he stood under the curse incurred for his people’s sins. The whole series of his emotions are, no doubt, affected by his position under the curse. Even his compassion receives from this a special quality: is this not included in the great declaration of Heb. iv. 15? Can we doubt that his anger against the powers of evil which afflict man, borrowed particular force from his own experience of their baneful working? And the sorrows and dreads which constricted his heart in the prospect of death, culminating in the extreme anguish of the dereliction,—do not these constitute the very substance of his atoning
In the Old Covenant era the clean animals that were offered in sacrifice were not rational creatures. They did not have minds capable of suffering anguish before an offended God. They could only feel the physical pain when their throats were cut by the priests. Therefore, the blood and suffering of bulls, sheep and goats cannot truly atone for sin (Heb. 9:12). But Christ was in all points just like us except He was without sin (cf. Heb. 4:15). Unlike those dumb sacrificial animals, Jesus was keenly aware of exactly what was going on. He could fully experience the wrath of God against sin. The wrath and alienation of God that He endured on the cross was real and it was horrific and agonizing to His rational, sinless, holy human soul. “He who did not spare His own son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). The sin placed upon the Savior was real sin. The wrath poured out upon the Redeemer was real wrath. And the suffering and agony that our Lord endured was real suffering. This truth is the heart of the gospel. As Edersheim notes,

Christ on the cross suffered for man; He offered Himself as a sacrifice; He died for our sins, that, as death was the wages of sin, so He died as the Representative of man—for man and in room of man: He obtained for man “eternal redemption [Heb. 9:12],” having given His life “a ransom, for many [Mt. 20:28].” For, men were “redeemed” with the “precious Blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot [1 Pet. 1:19]”; and Christ “gave Himself for us, that He might ‘redeem’ us from all iniquity [Tit. 2:14]”; He “gave Himself a ransom” for all [1 Tim. 2:6]”; Christ “died for all [2 Cor. 2:15]”; “Him, Who knew no sin, God ‘made sin for us [2 Cor. 5:21]”; “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us” [Gal. 3:13]—and this, with express reference to the Crucifixion. This sacrificial, vicarious, expiatory and redemptive character of His [suffering and] Death, if it does not explain to us, yet helps us to understand, Christ’s sense of God-forsakenness in the supreme moment of the Cross. 666

(4) There are a number of things regarding Jesus’ suffering and cry of dereliction that ought to affect our Christian attitude and walk.

First, a knowledge and understanding of what Christ endured on the cross ought to increase our love and faithfulness to the Savior. “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19). A believer should always view the moral law and obedience to God through the lens of the suffering and death of Christ. Our Lord went through the outer darkness, the agonies of hell and separation from God on our behalf. We need to meditate on what the Redeemer did for us and contemplate the His amazing love. As Paul says, “For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we yet were sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6-8). If we study and meditate on the cross we will keep before our hearts and eyes the love of Christ. Such thoughts will blossom into gratitude and affection. Gratitude and love will blossom into obedience or the fruits of faith.

Second, Jesus’ suffering and abandonment ought to be a great comfort and refuge for believing sinners. God sent the Son to suffer indescribable woes on our behalf. Our Lord

sufferings? As we survey the emotional life of our Lord as depicted by the Evangelists, therefore, let us not permit it to slip out of sight, that we are not only observing the proofs of the truths of his humanity, and not merely regarding the most perfect example of a human life which is afforded by history, but are contemplating the atoning work of the Savior in its fundamental elements. The cup which he drank to its bitter dregs was not his cup but our cup; and he needed to drink it only because he was set upon our salvation.” (The Person and Work of Christ [Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed (1950)], 145).

666 Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 606.
willingly endured the cup of God’s wrath for us. If God was willing to send His Son to die such an accursed death in our place, shall He not also freely give us all things (cf. Rom. 8:31-32)?

Because the Father was willing to forsake His only Begotten Son for us, we can rest assured that Jesus will never leave or forsake us (cf. Mt. 28:20). The Savior’s substitutionary atonement, which meets all the exigencies arising out of God’s nature and the consequences of sin, is the reason we are safe and secure. The sufficiency and perfection of the Lord’s atonement on Calvary repudiates all systems of works salvation (e.g., Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, Neo-nomianism, Shepherdism, the Federal Vision, etc). If you trust in the person and work of Christ you will have peace with God. “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Gal. 2:16).

Third, the suffering that Jesus endured teaches us to hate sin by showing us the heinousness of sin in God’s sight. Our Lord was not crucified simply for dramatic effect. His agony was not merely some kind of moral example. He suffered and died because of the sins of His people. If it were not for sin there would have been no bloody cross. Ultimately, it was sin that pounded the nails into the Savior’s hands and feet. It was sin that pushed the crown of thorns into the Redeemer’s head. It was sin that tore the flesh off of the Mediator’s back. And it was imputed sin that separated Jesus from His Father’s love, comfort and fellowship. Is it not obvious that every believer ought to hate the sin which tortured and murdered the precious Son of God?

When professing Christians have a light view of sin, it reveals a very deficient understanding of the cross. When people that claim to be believers wink at sin, treat the Son of God as a mere fire escape from hell or a cosmic Santa Claus who came so people could live lives of hedonism and material prosperity, one wonders if they even know the Savior. We must not harbor secret sins which brought agony to the heart of Jesus. We must not spend our time watching and delighting in Hollywood’s or Broadway’s elaborate presentation of actors mimicking wicked behavior. We must learn to see sin as God views it and hate it because it murdered Christ. Spurgeon writes,

O sirs, if I had a dear brother who had been murdered, what would you think of me if I valued the knife which had been crimsoned with his blood?—if I made a friend of the murderer, and daily consorted with the assassin, who drove the dagger into my brother’s heart? Surely I, too, must be an accomplice in the crime! Sin murdered Christ; will you be a friend to it? Sin pierced the heart of the Incarnate God; can you love it? Oh, that there was an abyss as deep as Christ’s misery, that I might at once hurl this dagger of sin into its depths, whence it might never be brought to light again! Begone, for thou hast crucified my Lord, and made him cry, “Why hast thou forsaken me?”

Fourth, the suffering and abandonment of Jesus give us a glimpse into the terrors of the final judgment. A time is coming in which the resurrected Savior Himself “will judge the world in righteousness” (Ac. 17:31). The one who endured hell and the forsaking of God will cast unbelievers into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Lk. 13:28). If you do not look to the Savior with faith and trust in His substitutionary atonement, then look with terror and dread at your own future. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). Unbelievers will not experience the

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shining smile of God on that day, but rather the curse for a life of sin, a life lived without faith in the Redeemer’s precious blood. Jesus will frown upon you and say, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Mt. 7:23). “Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt. 25:41). Then you will spend an eternity in agony and your soul will be continuously tormented with the “what ifs?” “Why did I ignore Jesus Christ to serve my own pleasures?” “Why could I not put aside the time to learn about Christ or go to church to hear the gospel?” “Why did I ignore the claims of the Son of God and play with foolish man-made philosophies?”

Right now is the time for you to understand that only Jesus’ suffering and death deals with sin and the punishment that sin deserves. Therefore, it is time to forsake your sin and embrace the person and work of Christ. There are only two options. Either you trust in the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ and He pays the ultimate price for sin in your place; or, you will pay for your own sins in the outer darkness, loneliness and suffering of hell. “And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night” (Rev. 14:11).

Fifth, Christians should study Christ and from His experience learn what to do when they feel forsaken. There are times when believers go through such severe trials that they may be tempted to give way to despair. In such situations we ought to first search our own hearts to make sure we are not harboring secret sins. Also, we must understand that some of the greatest saints in the Bible for a time did not sense God’s face shining upon them. Therefore, it does not need to be interpreted as some chastisement for personal sin. It may (like the case of Job) be God’s method for drawing us nearer to Him. In similar circumstances we need to look to the Lord and pray with fervency as Christ prayed.

Christians who suffer and feel that God’s face is turned away from them “should not write bitter things about themselves, and hastily conclude they are cast off forever, or are self-deceivers and have no grace at all. Let them still wait on the Lord and say with Job, ‘Though he slay me, yet I will hope in him’ (Job 13:15). Let them remember the words of Isaiah: ‘Who among you fears the LORD…? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God’ (Isaiah 50:10). And of David: ‘Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God’ (Psalm 42:11).” Jesus as the “Captain” or “Lead Climber” of our salvation endured the real forsakenness and emerged victorious. Therefore, in similar circumstances when the sky is darkened in our lives, let us look to Him with a firm faith. Because of what Christ accomplished, every Christian can pray in this manner:

Precious, precious Redeemer, may I never, never lose sight of thee in this part of thy sufferings also; and especially eye thee still more when my soul is under the hidings of God’s countenance. Let me recollect, dearest Lord! That thou hast been forsaken before thy people, and for thy people; and here, as in all other instances, thou hast the pre-eminence, so as to sanctify even our momentary desertions to our good and to thy glory. Yes, precious Lord! Such are the blessed effects of thy desertion, that hence my soul learns, my God still supports, though my God may withhold his comforts. Jesus was forsaken for a season, that my soul might not be forsaken for ever. And grant me, dearest Lord, from thy bright example, to cast myself wholly

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668 J. C. Ryle, Mark, 256.
upon thee, as thou didst upon thy Father, when all sensible comforts fail, convinced that thou
"art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!"669

The Reaction to the Cry of Abandonment

Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, “This man calleth for Elias.” And
straightway one of them ran, and took a spunge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed,
and gave him to drink. The rest said, “Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.”
(Mt. 27:47-49; cf. Mk. 15:35-36)

The cry of Jesus out of the darkness elicits a challenge regarding Elijah. In Matthew and
Mark, this reaction is directly connected to the offer of sour wine. In order to understand what is
taking place in this scene we will examine three areas: (1) the circumstances of the reaction; (2)
the reaction itself; (3) the relationship of the reaction to the sponge of vinegar.

(1) The circumstances of the reaction were threefold. First, there was the startling, loud,
agonizing cry of the Redeemer. Likely, this cry came after a very long period of sobering,
terrifying darkness. Therefore, it is likely that our Lord’s cry of dereliction in a sense “broke the
ice” and set loose the tongues of Christ’s enemies.

Second, it is probable though not explicitly stated that very soon after the Savior’s cry of
abandonment, the sun once again began to shine over Palestine. This assertion is supported by a
number of inferences from Scripture. a) When Jesus died on the cross, which occurred only
minutes after the cry of dereliction, the gospels tells us that many women were beholding Him
from afar (Mt. 27:55; Mk. 15:40). Luke wrote: “But all His acquaintances, and the women who
followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things” (23:49). Further, the
synoptic gospels say that the Roman centurion saw Jesus’ death and the attending earthquake
(Mk. 15:39; Mt. 27:54; Lk. 23:47). Therefore, the darkness was removed immediately before our
Lord’s death and not after He gave up His spirit. Thus, it is likely that the return of light over the
land emboldened Christ’s enemies to renew their mockeries. b) The Savior’s shout of victory, “It
is finished” (Jn. 19:30), tells us that our Lord’s atoning work on the cross—His redemptive
sufferings—were completed. Obviously, if the Redeemer’s vicarious suffering and abandonment
were over, then the attending darkness of hell and forsakenness would be theologically,
biblically and chronologically inappropriate. The darkness passed because the suffering of
abandonment had passed.

Third, the people who reacted to our Lord’s cry of dereliction were probably Jews.
Although Mark and Matthew are not specific and only say that “some of them that stood there,”
we believe the response is from the Jews for a number of reasons. a) It is not likely that the
Roman soldiers were proficient in the Aramaic language. The soldiers, however, may have been
recruited from the provincial areas of the Empire such as Syria and thus could have understood
Aramaic. b) But, even if they did, they certainly were not familiar with current Jewish doctrine
regarding the coming of Elijah in relation with the Messiah. The response clearly flowed from
the Jewish messianic expectation at that time.

(2) Regarding the reaction of the Jews, commentators hold two very different opinions.
The first view is that the hearers made an honest mistake because of the similarity between eli
(My God) and eliya (Elijah). The bystanders thought they heard Elijah’s name and therefore

believed that Jesus was calling upon Elijah to come and save him. The second interpretation is that Christ’s statement was deliberately twisted as a call for rescue from Elijah in order to continue the mockery that took place before the darkness. The second view makes more sense given the fact that: a) God’s Word says that the Savior shouted these words. Therefore, the Redeemer’s words were clearly heard by the people attending the crucifixion. b) It is extremely unlikely that a Jew would have mistaken Eli for the name of Elijah. c) Our Lord was quoting from Psalm 22:1. The Psalter was probably the most familiar section of Scripture to the Jews given its place in their liturgy. The Jews knew that Jesus was quoting from Psalm 22 in His cry to God. Therefore, on these grounds, we think it was likely that the Jews were making a coarse joke using bitter irony or sarcasm.

Earlier, the Jews had mocked the Savior by demanding that He prove His claims by coming down from the cross (Mt. 27:40, 42; Mk. 15:30, 32; Lk. 23:35). They also mocked Him by implying that if He really was the Son of God that God would give Him immediate deliverance. Now, after the sun reappears, they continue this type of mockery with a reference to Elijah. They were rubbing in the fact that Christ would not be delivered from death. Keep in mind that for the Jews at this time Elijah the prophet played a very important role in their messianic expectations. They had over-literalized Malachi 4:5 regarding the coming of Elijah and were expecting Elijah to come from heaven to precede and help the Messiah. Ancient rabbinic writings speak of Elijah coming first to restore all things and to rescue the righteous. The Jews were taunting our Lord by essentially implying that if Jesus was righteous and the genuine Messiah, then He must be delivered by Elijah. This mockery completed their deluded two-fold witness against Christ. They reasoned as follows, Jesus could not save Himself; therefore, He cannot be the Son of God. Elijah has refused to come to Jesus’ aid; therefore, he cannot be the Messiah. Their perverted, darkened minds were still tormenting the Savior.

The fact that the mockery of the Savior continued after the three hours of darkness tells us something very disturbing about fallen human nature. It demonstrates that the apparent movements of the unregenerate toward pious thoughts and actions during times of crises are only temporary. The unexpected darkness had shut the mouths of the wicked. The unbelieving mob instinctively knew that silence was the proper response to the miraculous darkness. But this sobering event which stirred fear in their hearts did not lead the crowd to genuine repentance. As soon as the rays of the sun began to shine, their mocking tongues followed their blackened hearts.

This tragic reality has been observed in our own time during shocking disasters. When America was attacked by terrorists on September 11, 2001, the sarcastic mouths were silenced; the filthy tongues were curbed. People talked about God, prayer, love, community and spirituality. But the sobering effect of a great and shocking tragedy was only temporary. The natural man returns to his lusts rather quickly like a dog returns to its vomit or a pig to its wallowing in the mire (2 Pet. 2:22). Without a fundamental change of heart, it is only a matter of time before everything returns to business as usual.

(3) In the midst of the reaction we read about someone who takes a sponge, puts it on the end of a reed, fills it with vinegar and places it at Jesus’ mouth, thus offering Him a drink. If we read Matthew and Mark, it appears almost to be purely an arbitrary act. The apostle John, however, clarifies matters by giving us an important detail. John 19:28-30 reads, “After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, ‘I thirst.’ Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a spunge with vinegar, and

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put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, ‘It is finished;’ and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.” There are four things that are noteworthy regarding this incident.

First, note that the Savior completely ignores His tormentors. Instead, Christ was meditating on the Scriptures and preparing to speak the great words of victory: “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30). Calvin writes,

But instead of speaking to the deaf, he betook himself directly to God, and committed to his bosom the assurance of his confidence. He wished, indeed, that men should hear what he said; but though it might be of no avail to men, he was satisfied with having God alone as his witness. And certainly there is not a stronger or more decided testimony of faith than when a pious man—perceiving himself attacked on every hand, so that he finds no consolation on the part of men—despises the madness of the whole world, discharges his sorrows and cares into the bosom of God, and rests in the hope of his promises.

When Christians are mocked and mistreated by wicked men simply for their faith in Christ, often the best thing to do is to remain silent. When people react to the truth of the gospel with hatred and violence, we must as it were shake off the dust from beneath our feet as a testimony against them (Mt. 10:14; Mk. 6:11; Lk. 9:5; 10:11; Ac. 13:51). When they know the truth intellectually and emphatically reject it and persecute believers, then there is no longer any point in attempting to reason with them. It is time, so to speak, to leave town.

Second, the Redeemer consciously fulfills prophecy. John says that Jesus cried “I thirst” specifically so that “the Scripture might be fulfilled” (Jn. 19:29). This verse demonstrates that: a) Our Lord was thinking about the Bible and the prophecies concerning Himself while on the cross; and b) Christ had no problem whatsoever in taking direct action to make sure that every prophecy was fulfilled. Obviously, the Savior believed that the sovereignty of God, or His decreative will, did not overthrow or conflict with the will of men as true secondary agents. As the Mediator hung on the cross and knew that He was about to deliver up His spirit to the Father, He realized that Psalm 69:21 (“They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.”) had not yet been fulfilled. The soldiers (or the women of Jerusalem) had already offered Him gall to deaden His pain (Mt. 27:34; Mk. 15:23). Jesus, however, refused the gall. The offer of vinegar as a refreshing drink had not yet occurred. So our Lord said “I thirst” (Jn. 19:28), knowing that a Roman soldier would offer Him a drink. “Every part of the great sacrifice for sin was foreordained and arranged in the eternal counsels of the Trinity, even to the words which He was to speak on the cross.”

When we put John’s account together with Matthew’s and Mark’s records we can now see the relationship between the mockery and the offer of vinegar. It is very likely that one of the Roman soldiers being ignorant of first century Jewish interpretations and traditions regarding Elijah, took the mocking interpretations of Christ’s words at face value. Therefore, when the Savior said “I thirst,” the soldier “ran” to give Jesus a drink to preserve His life a little longer to

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672 “‘I thirst’ would naturally have been said in a low voice so that it could be heard only by those near the Cross. That John should have specifically recorded this word is in keeping with the emphasis laid, throughout the Fourth Gospel, on the humanity of Jesus. As He asked the Samaritan woman for water when He was thirsty (4:7), so now” (J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2:635).

see if Elijah would indeed deliver Him. Our Lord knew what the soldier was thinking and knew that His request would be granted. This interpretation is supported by the fact that both the one who gave the drink (Mk. 15:36) and the bystanders said immediately after the drink was given, “Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him” (Mt. 27:49). The soldier probably said this out of ignorance, while the Jews were continuing their mockery.

The reason that most scholars believe that it was a Roman soldier who gave Christ a drink is that the soldiers would have brought provisions for a long day of guard duty. This would have included a large container of water mixed with sour wine (cf. Jn. 19:29). Thus, the soldiers who were near the cross had a drink available. Further, it is unlikely that a Jew would have been permitted to help himself to the Roman provisions. A Roman guard, either on his own initiative or under the direct orders of the centurion, gave Jesus a drink. Lenski writes,

Matthew and Mark report that one man gave Jesus the drink, while John uses the plural endings in the participle and in the main verb. Naturally one man performed the act; that others repeated it is unlikely and even unnecessary. This man must have been one of the four soldiers, for the vinegar, etc., belonged to them. John’s plural is explained when we note that this soldier acted with the centurion’s consent, who may even have hidden one of his men to act. The indefinite plural thus conveys the idea that the drink came from the soldiers; it was not merely the deed of one who was more tenderhearted than the rest.  

This view is supported by the fact that the centurion developed a very high opinion of the Savior during the Redeemer’s crucifixion and death (cf. Mk. 15:39; Mt. 27:54; Lk. 23:47).

Third, the expression, “I thirst,” demonstrates the reality and intensity of Jesus’ physical sufferings. Because of the influence of Greek philosophy and the calm, patient manner in which the Savior endured His suffering, a heresy called docetism arose soon after the death of the apostles. “Docetism is the view that the body of Christ was not real but only seeming (Gk. dokein, ‘to seem’), and so either the sufferings were only apparent, or else the redeemer who could not suffer was separate from the man in whom He appeared.” The gospel accounts, on the contrary, make it crystal clear that our Lord really suffered on the cross. The Redeemer felt a burning and consuming thirst. The great loss of blood during the crucifixion caused a severe dehydration. David referred to this radical dehydration in Psalm 22:15: “My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death.” Interestingly, the “torments of hell are represented by a violent thirst, in the complaint of the rich man who begged for a drop of water to cool his tongue. To that everlasting thirst we had all been condemned, if Christ had not suffered on the cross, and said, ‘I thirst.’”

Fourth, we can infer from the immediate context that one reason the Savior asked for a drink was to moisten and lubricate His parched mouth. Jesus wanted to loudly and clearly

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676 “When the eternal Word became incarnate, He did not cease to be God, nor did He lay aside any of His Divine attributes; but He did become flesh; being made in all things like unto His brethren. He ‘increased in wisdom and stature’ (Luke 2:52); He ‘wearied’ in body (John 4:6); He was ‘an hungered’ (Matt. 4:2); He ‘slept’ (Mark 4:38); He ‘marveled’ (Mark 6:6); He ‘wept’ (John 11:35); He ‘prayed’ (Mark 1:35); He ‘rejoiced’ (Luke 10:31); He ‘groaned’ (John 11:23); and here, He ‘thirsted.’ God does not thirst; there is no hint (so far as we are aware) that the angels ever do; we shall not in the Glory (Rev. 7:16). But Christ did, as man, in the depths of His humiliation” (Arthur W. Pink, Exposition of the Gospel of John, 3:242-243).
pronounce His victory over sin. “So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished!’ And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit” (Jn. 19:30). Our Lord did not ask for a drink simply to die but to speak. “He wants his lips and his throat moistened in order that he may do just what the synoptists report that he does, namely utter a loud shout…” 678 The incident regarding the Redeemer’s thirst, the fulfillment of the last prophecy regarding His suffering and the moistening of the dying Savior’s tongue form the transition from the loud cry of abandonment to the loud shout of victory.

Chapter 19: “It Is Finished!”

After receiving the sour wine, Christ uttered His sixth statement from the cross: “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30). This is the most remarkable and important statement that Jesus spoke from the cross. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say this brief statement is the most important made in the history of mankind. Jesus Christ, who of His own volition relinquished the indescribable glory of the throne room of heaven; who voluntarily lived a life of humiliation and rejection; who lived under the law and obeyed it in exhaustive detail; who suffered the horrors of hell and the abandonment of the cross, could now say, “I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do” (Jn. 17:4). These words of supreme victory ought to be precious to every believer because the Savior has finished redemption for His people. These dying words of the Redeemer also stand as a wall of iron against all theological perversions of the doctrine of salvation. There are a number of things to note regarding our Lord’s shout of victory.

First, this statement in the Greek language consists of only one word: *tetelestai* (perfect passive indicative of *teleo*). “The rendering, ‘It is finished!’ conveys only half the meaning. For the verb *teleo* fundamentally denotes ‘to carry out’ the will of somebody, whether of oneself or another, and so to fulfill obligations or carry out religious acts. ‘It is accomplished!’ renders that aspect of the word. Doubtless both meanings of the term, the temporal and the theological, are intended here.” 679 Jesus finished His redemptive work and thus accomplished all that the Father had given Him to do.

The verb tense used denotes a progressive action over time that has now been brought to completion. The Savior had been perfectly obeying His Father’s will throughout the whole course of His earthly life (a life that involved suffering and humiliation) and He had *especially* been suffering vicariously since entering the garden of Gethsemane (the period of His mysterious agony) which began around 17 hours before His death (about 10:00 pm Thursday evening). All of this (the active and passive obedience of Christ) was now finished, completed or accomplished. The entire work of redemption, which included fulfilling the law and bearing the law’s curse for sin, has been accomplished by Jesus. Nothing more needs to be done.

But didn’t our Lord have to be buried and resurrected before His redemptive work was truly finished? While the resurrection of Christ is absolutely essential in Christian soteriology, it is important to recognize that the resurrection of the Lord was an *inescapable consequence* of the Savior’s redemptive obedience. That’s why the author of Hebrews says that “God…brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead…through the blood of the everlasting covenant” (13:20). The Bible

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teaches that our Lord’s bloody sacrificial death caused or resulted in the resurrection. The Savior’s atoning work on the cross was so perfect, complete and sufficient that the resurrection was the reward and vindication of it. By the resurrection God publicly declared that Jesus’ work was perfect and fully accepted. “When the Bible says, ‘If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins’ (1 Corinthians 15:17), the point is not that the resurrection is the price paid for our sins. The point is that the resurrection proves that the death of Jesus is an all-sufficient price. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then his death was a failure, God did not vindicate his sin-bearing achievement, and we are still in our sins.”

But as we all know, God gloriously vindicated His Son. Once Jesus paid the price in full for sin by His perfect sacrifice and conquered sin and death, death could not permanently hold Him. Thus the Redeemer said, “I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and death” (Rev. 1:18). The vicarious suffering or atonement of the Savior is the foundation of salvation and the resurrection is the reward for Christ’s active and passive obedience. The bloody sacrifice was the victory that secured “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Mt. 28:18) at the resurrection.

Second, what is the precise meaning of our Lord’s cry, “It is finished”? The passage itself does not explicitly tell us what is finished. Therefore, expositors have interpreted the shout in both a broad and narrow manner. The commentators who view this expression through the broad lens of Scripture will point to many things that were brought to completion by our Lord’s vicarious suffering and death. a) There are the many prophecies regarding the suffering of the Messiah. Every one of them was perfectly fulfilled. b) There are the ceremonial laws: the animal sacrifices, the temple, incense, and the priesthood (i.e. all the types and shadows which pointed to Jesus’ redemptive work). c) There is the condemning power of the law for God’s people. Christ’s sacrificial death covered the sins and ended the curse of the law for all believers past, present and future. Because of the Redeemer’s victory, every one is justified the moment they believe. d) The Jewish nation as the expression of the visible church was brought to an end. The separation between Jew and Gentile was now finished and done away forever. e) “The iron reign of sin and Satan, of death and hell, were now broken in pieces by this stone cut out of the mountains without hands.”

f) The Mosaic administration of the covenant grace with its rites, ceremonies, festivals, national borders, and peculiar, sundry judicial laws (i.e. national laws that were not moral in character) was now finished. g) And the Savior’s redemptive work of expiation, propitiation, redemption and reconciliation was now completed.

While the broad interpretation of our Lord’s words is based on Scripture and is certainly true as an application of Christ’s words, it is likely that Jesus is speaking specifically about His redemptive work. “This specific work is now brought to a close. The Lamb of God has made his great sacrifice for the world. It is this that is now done. Our great Substitute has paid the great price of ransom, paid it to the uttermost farthing. ‘It is finished’ indeed!”

“The limitation to the state of humiliation is obvious, from the fact that our Lord uttered it on the cross, where that humiliation had its end.”

That which is finished is the consciously suffered humiliation in body and in spirit. Not the serving, but the being a slave in humiliation; that observed from the

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active side, has now been finished. The torment of the payment, the suffering of the penalty, and both of these consciously, that is finished.\textsuperscript{684}

The essence of our Lord’s expiatory work was suffering. The Mediator paid the full penalty for sin on our behalf. These unparalleled sufferings were now brought to an end. Only seconds after these words Christ’s spirit would be in the presence of His Father. The Redeemer’s cry of agony because of the Father’s displeasure at the imputed sin upon Him would be replaced by unspeakable joy. Jesus was going home. The Father was now smiling upon Him. The Mediator had been faithful and God was loving and delighting in His Son. Yes, it is true that His body had to go through the humiliation of burial, but during this time His soul was in heaven beholding the face of God. The Captain of our salvation fought the great battle and, by shedding His own blood, He triumphed over sin, Satan, death and hell. His victory cry, “It is finished” means the war (definitively speaking) is over. “And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death” (Col. 1:21-22).

Third, we ask, to whom was this victory cry directed? Although the passage does not answer this question directly, we can infer from the context that our Lord was announcing His victory to the Father. Given the fact that this announcement is made between two statements to the Father (“My God, My God…” [Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34] and “Father, into they hand I commend my spirit” [Lk. 23:46]), it is likely that Jesus is speaking directly to God. “Father, it is finished. I have finished the work that You gave Me to do. I have satisfied your perfect justice with regard to precept and penalty.” “As the Son of God He reports to the Holy Trinity.”\textsuperscript{685} He has perfectly fulfilled His eternal promise given in the covenant of redemption (the \textit{pactum salutis}) before the world even existed.

Although He was reporting His victory to the Father, He was doing so publicly and loudly. Christ wanted all those who were present, whether disciples, Roman guards, idle spectators or even hostile enemies, to know that His suffering unto death resulted in victory. The gospel of Jesus Christ is something that is public. It is to be announced to the whole world. This shout of victory is the object of our faith. It places the divine exclamation point upon the Savior’s redemptive obedience. It marks the centerpiece and pinnacle of all human history. The cry of victory ought to comfort our hearts. It should be the anchor of our assurance. “[L]et these dying words of…Jesus be made by thee as an answer to all thy prayers, and begin that song to the Lamb, which ere long, thou wilt fully and loudly sing among the church above—‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain; for thou wast slain and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood.’”\textsuperscript{686}

Fourth, there are a number of theological implications of the Redeemer’s victory cry. One implication is the perfection and sufficiency of Christ’s suffering and death on the cross. The author of Hebrews says, “By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all…. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right of God…. For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (10:10, 12, 14). By His suffering and death the Savior paid the \textit{full price} or penalty for the sins of the elect (redemption). By removing all of a believing sinner’s sins (past, present and future) (expiation), Jesus removes all of God’s wrath against the sinner (propitiation). Consequently, the believing sinner is reconciled to God. Now, if our Lord paid the penalty in full, removed \textit{all} of a believer’s sin and totally reconciled the believing sinner to God by His

\textsuperscript{684} Klaas Schilder, \textit{Christ Crucified}, 451.  
\textsuperscript{685} Ibid, 455.  
\textsuperscript{686} Robert Hawker, \textit{The Poor Man’s Morning and Evening Portions}, 293.
suffering and death, then what more needs to be done or what possibly can be added to the work of Christ?

The victory cry, “It is finished,” means the Savior’s work of sacrifice is done. “Its absolute perfection means that it is a single sacrifice for sins and that its effectiveness is for all time, and thus it can never be added to or repeated.” There is finality to the Mediator’s redemptive work precisely because it was perfect, sufficient and efficacious. As a result of this perfect sacrifice, Jesus was invested with unlimited power and dominion at the resurrection and now sits exalted at the right hand of God the Father. The effects of this perfect sacrifice permeate all human history. The resurrected King now progressively gathers in His elect (i.e. those purchased with His blood); and, He will also judge and subjugate all rebels against His throne. “The Redeemer having perfected His great work, now calmly awaits the fulfillment of the Father’s promise: cf. 1 Cor. 15:25-27.” Turretin comments, “[T]he satisfaction of Christ was so perfect and sufficient that he most fully satisfied for all our sins by the one offering of himself, not only for our guilt, but also for both temporal and eternal punishment. Henceforth there are no more propitiatory offerings or satisfaction to be made for sin, either in this life or after it, although believers are often subjected to the chastisement of God to promote their penitence and sanctification.”

The sufficiency and perfection of Jesus’ work completely overturns Roman Catholic doctrines such as the mass, purgatory and human merit in relation to justification. In the mass the papal church claims that Christ is re-sacrificed. Their own creeds say, “If anyone says that in the mass a true and real sacrifice is not offered to God…let him be anathema” (Council of Trent, 22nd sess., can. 1). “If anyone says that…Christ…did not ordain that…other priests should offer His own body and blood, let him be anathema” (Can. 3). In fact, the ritual of the mass is the most central aspect of the Roman Catholic faith. It is the centerpiece and climax of all their worship services, performed thousands of times each day throughout the world in Romanist churches. Yet, it is totally unbiblical and antithetical to our Lord’s statement, “It is finished.” The mass presupposes that the Savior’s suffering and death on the cross did not complete the task of redemption. It assumes that the work of expiation and propitiation must continue throughout history performed by the Roman Catholic sacerdotal priesthood.

But the Bible teaches that the Roman Catholic mass is wicked and sinful, for it denies the sufficiency and efficacy of Christ’s atoning work on Calvary. The author of Hebrews rebukes the papal church: “such a High Priest [Jesus] was fitting for us…who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself” (7:26, 27). “He entered the Most Holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption” (9:12). “Once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (9:26). “Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many” (9:28). Paul writes, “Christ having been raised from the dead, dies no more…. He died to sin once for all” (Rom. 6:9-10). Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes,

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an announcement, a proclamation to the whole universe by God that His Son has completed the work of atonement and of redemption and of salvation. That is the apostle’s argument here. He says, We know this, that Christ being (having been) raised from the dead dieth no more. Why? Because there is no need for Him to die any more.

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687 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, 400.
He does not go on dying. He has done that once and for ever. The resurrection proves that; it proves that He has finished the work and that the end in view has been accomplished.\textsuperscript{690}

The most common denial of the words, “It is finished” (or the sufficiency, necessity and efficacy of Christ’s atoning work) by our modern “anti-Christian” culture is the very common idea that repentance or turning over a new leaf can secure pardon from sin. While repentance, as biblically defined, always accompanies salvation as a fruit of regeneration and saving faith, the idea that repenting and being a “good” person gets one into heaven must be rejected for the following reasons.

First, being “sorry” for sin and changing the direction of one’s life for the better (e.g., Mr. Smith stopped getting drunk and began to serve the poor in a soup kitchen) cannot remove the guilt of sin or the liability of punishment that sin deserves. Even if an unregenerate person could from the heart begin a holy life (which biblically speaking is impossible), it would at best only change the \textit{subjective state} of the sinner. However, it could not (no matter how hard the person tried) change the fact of the \textit{objective guilt} that is a consequence of every sin committed. Nowhere in the Bible is it taught that guilt can be lessened or eliminated by “good works.” In fact, Paul says, “By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). The idea that present “obedience” can atone for past sins was the invention of apostate rabbinic Judaism and was incorporated into Islam by Mohammed, who patched together a number of heresies in his new \textit{made-up} religion. Variants of this heresy have found their way into the Roman Catholic Church, as in penance and works of supererogation.

Repentance cannot counteract the consequences of sin. “By sin the majesty of God is insulted; repentance has no effect in wiping off this reproach. By sin a debt is contracted to the divine law and justice; penitence makes no compensation for this debt. In [the] case of the breach of human laws, repentance is never looked upon as making legal compensation or removing the consequences of guilt.”\textsuperscript{691} The Bible explicitly teaches that the consequence of sin is real, objective guilt which results in death. Turning over a new leaf cannot eliminate the spiritual death penalty for sin. Only Christ’s suffering and death in the place of the believing sinner can deal with the consequences of sin.

Second, Paul teaches that people who attempt to be saved by good works are entangled in a yoke of bondage (read Gal. 5:1-4). The point the apostle is making is that people who attempt to be saved by repentance and good works are lost forever because: a) People who do not look \textit{to Jesus alone} for salvation are severed from Christ. It is impossible to believe in Christ (which is an acknowledgement that you cannot save yourself) while simultaneously trusting in your own works (which is a claim that you are able to save yourself). If you look to your works in any way then you have rejected the perfect, complete, sufficient salvation achieved by the Savior. b) The only kind of obedience that would be acceptable in God’s sight would be an absolutely perfect and perpetual obedience in thought, word and deed from birth until death. A few years of so-called “clean living” cannot annul or erase a life of sin and a mountain of guilt. “If you add anything to Christ, you lose Christ. Salvation is in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone.”\textsuperscript{692}

Third, the Bible teaches that unregenerate sinners are incapable, apart from a sovereign work of God’s grace, of truly repenting. In fact, the work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating the

\textsuperscript{690} D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, \textit{Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 6} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 99-100.
\textsuperscript{691} William Symington, \textit{On the Atonement and Intercession of Jesus Christ}, 61.
hearts of sinners flows from and is dependent upon Jesus’ achieved redemption upon the cross. Our Lord’s perfect redemption is the fountain out of which flows regeneration, faith, repentance and sanctification. Union with Christ in His life, death, and resurrection guarantees that the elect sinner will be regenerated, sanctified and glorified. The Mediator saves His people from the guilt (justification) as well as the power of sin (sanctification). Everyone united to Christ will receive the gifts of faith (Eph. 2:8) and repentance (Ac. 5:31; 11:18). Therefore, people are not saved because they exercise some intrinsic power to repent. Rather, they repent because the efficacy of the Savior’s death first enables them to repent. In other words, repentance is a fruit of salvation and not the cause or even the instrument of it. Further, the Bible clearly teaches that “good works” are not actually good unless they flow from faith in Christ (cf. Rom. 8:7-8; 14:23). “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:4). “[T]here can be no works good in the sight of God but what flow from, and are connected with, the atonement. Good works can be performed only by those who are united to Christ by faith, that is, are in a justified state.”

Chapter 20: The Death of Christ

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, “It is finished”; and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost [spirit] (Jn. 19:30).

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit”: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost [spirit] (Lk. 23:46).

Immediately after our Lord said, “It is finished,” He delivered up His spirit to the Father and died. There are a number of things to note regarding the death of Christ.

(1) It is important to note that Jesus, acting as a high priest, was completely in control of His own death. Thus, we could say that there never, ever was a death like Christ’s. His control over His own death is demonstrated by the following points.

First, all three synoptic gospels say that the Redeemer cried out with a loud voice the moment before He died. Luke’s account tells us what the Savior cried out. This means that our Lord did not die from a slow exhaustion or from His wounds but that He willed His death. Normally, when a man is on the verge of death his voice is feeble not strong. This reality was especially true of crucifixion where the blood is drained from the body and the lungs are sore pressed for a full breath of air. But, having completed the task of redemption, Jesus now boldly commends His spirit into the hands of His Father. He finished His redemptive suffering and was now ready to return to God. “No wonder his voice rose to its loudest pitch.” 694 “‘He gave up his life because he willed it, when he willed it, and as he willed it’ (Augustine).” 695 “[T]his loud

693 William Symington, On the Atonement and Intercession of Christ, 64. Paul says, “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). Solomon says that even “the plowing of the wicked [is] sin” (Prov. 21:4). True faith in Christ, which issues forth from a regenerate heart, is the foundation of genuine virtue. An act which is outwardly good, but done to glorify self and Satan rather than Christ cannot please God. “The carnal mind is enmity against God” (Rom. 8:7-8). Paul is teaching that people who are not already regenerated and saved by Christ cannot even do one thing that is spiritually or truly good in God’s sight. Obviously then, Jesus and His work of redemption is the only way to heaven. Christ is man’s only hope of salvation.

voice signified the great strength and ardency of affection wherewith we have to do with God, to put forth our utmost vigour, and to perform all the duties of religion, particularly that of self-resignation, with our whole heart and our whole soul.”

Second, that our Lord’s death was a voluntary act is indicated by the expressions used to describe it. John says that Jesus “gave over (up) His spirit” (Gk. paredoken to pneuma). Likewise, Matthew says “He yielded up His spirit” (27:50). Mark and Luke simply say that the Savior “breathed His last” (literally, “breathed out”). “The word rendered breathed his last, exepneusen, is not the normal one for saying that someone has died. In fact none of the Evangelists says ‘Jesus died’, which may be part of the way they bring out the truth that in Jesus’ death there was something most unusual.” The words, “He gave up His spirit,” remind us of His own remarkable statement in John 10:17-18: “I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” “The uniqueness of Christ’s action here may also be seen by comparing His words with those of Stephen’s. As the first Christian martyr was dying, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus receive my Spirit’ (Acts 7:59). In sharp contrast from Stephen, Christ ‘gave up the spirit’; Stephen’s was taken from him, not so the Saviour’s.”

That our Lord as a high priest sovereignly laid down His life and chose the time of His death is proven by the Redeemer’s last statement while on the cross, found only in Luke: “Father, into your hands I commit My Spirit” (Lk. 23:46). Jesus committed, entrusted or deposited His human spirit over to the Father in heaven. Schilder writes,

If we compare the several usages which the Greek has the word “to commit” (“commit my spirit”) as found in the New Testament, we will see that in every case it means a conscious, active assertion of faith, in which, with faith in God, one commends some specific desire to Him, or leaves the decisive turn of one’s life in His hands. Thus we read of committing a certain task to someone (Luke 12:48), or of committing elders of the souls of believers to the Lord (Acts 14:23; 1 Peter 4:19), or of commending a number of Christians to God and to the word of His grace (Acts 20:32), or, similarly, of entrusting and transmitting the content of preaching to faithful witnesses (II Timothy 2:2), or of enjoining a command (I Timothy 1:18). Christ therefore performs an active deed.

The Mediator delivered up His spirit into His Father’s loving hands. He committed His human soul over to God’s special presence for divine care, protection and fellowship, while He awaited the resurrection.

The Redeemer’s last statement is an allusion to Psalm 31:5 with some alterations. He uses the expression “Into Your hand I commit My Spirit,” but adds the word Father, which makes it very personal and Christological. He omits “the clause that immediately follows in the

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698 Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:246. “None of the Evangelists say that Jesus died, although that expression is ever after used of His death, when stated as one great fact. Matthew says that He ‘yielded up the ghost.’ Mark, Luke, and John, though in different Greek words, say much the same, ‘He gave up the ghost.’ In all the five Old Testament passages which our translators have rendered ‘giving up the ghost,’ the Septuagint Greek translators have not used the expressions applied in the Gospels to our Lord’s death, nor any thing like them. Gen. lxix.33; Job x.18, xi.20, xiv.10; Jer. xv.9. The Greek expression about Saipphira, which is rendered, ‘yielded up the ghost,’ Acts v. 10, is totally different from those used about our Lord’s death.” (Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 671)
psalm, namely, ‘Thou hast redeemed me.’ In the case of Christ the Sinless One, no such redemption was necessary or even possible.”

Before the land descended into darkness and Jesus experienced being forsaken by God, He had always addressed God as Father. Now that the dreadful agony of the abandonment was over, He once again addresses God as Father. By depositing His spirit with the Father, Christ shows us His dependence upon the Father for the reunion of His soul and body and resurrection from the dead. This passage is clear proof that our Lord had a real human body and genuine human soul. It stands as a witness against the many errors regarding the person of Christ and the heresy of full preterism which denies the future bodily resurrection of believers.

This passage (along with Luke 23:43, “Today, you shall be with Me in Paradise”) is clear proof that the human spirit of the Mediator went to heaven immediately after death. The idea that His soul had to suffer in hell after death or even that He went to Hades to preach to the imprisoned spirits has no support in Scripture (see the section on Lk. 23:43 above). “[T]he Father could not keep back from His bosom one who had so perfectly done the will of His Father.”

“[H]is spirit, or soul, belonged to God, the father of spirits, and now returned to him that gave it.”

The person who believes in Jesus and lives his life for Him can with full assurance at his death ask God to receive his spirit because of the merits of His dear Son. Only true believers in the person and work of Christ can call upon God as Father to take care of their souls at the hour of death. Given the indisputable fact that all men must eventually die, it is sad and tragic that very few men are prepared to meet the jaws of death. People go on living as though the time of death will never come; they go about their lives as though God did not really exist. Then when the sting of death comes upon them they are completely unprepared. Those who live without Christ will die without Him also. If we are to die with the peace, joy and calmness that the Redeemer exhibited at His death, then we must trust in His suffering, blood and death. “He died for our sins, as our Substitute. His death is our life. He died that we might live. We who believe on Christ shall live for evermore, sinners as we are, because Christ died for us, the innocent for the guilty.”

The soul of believers upon death immediately goes before Jesus in the paradise of heaven. Are you ready to die? Are you ready to meet your Maker? Are your sins covered by the blood of the Mediator?

(2) As a sacrifice for sin, our Lord’s atoning work was brought to completion by His death. The statement, “It is finished,” includes the Savior’s yielding His spirit to God. Jesus “became obedient to the point of death” (Phil. 2:8). Paul says that “we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Rom. 5:10). God was angry with us because of our sins, but the Mediator removed God’s wrath by suffering unto death. Because the penalty for sin is death, “no degree of suffering would have been sufficient as an atonement for our sins without the actual death of the sacrifice…. Jesus Christ might have suffered all that He did suffer without a total extinction of life; but He must not only suffer,—He must also die.”

The death of Christ was necessary to satisfy divine justice. Redemption is not by truth, or example, or ethical living, or moral influence, but by the Redeemer’s blood or death.

Our Lord came for “the suffering of death” (Heb. 9:15). Hughes writes,

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The basis of Christ’s mediatorialship of the new covenant is a death which has occurred. This association of a covenant and its solemnization with death, particularly in the form of a sacrifice with the shedding of blood, appears to have prevailed from the earliest times. Thus the slaughter of animal victims accompanied the establishment of the covenant between Jacob and Laban involved the offering of a sacrifice (Gen. 31:54); the Mosaic covenant was inaugurated with the building of an altar, the offering of sacrifices, and the sprinkling of the people with “the blood of the covenant” upon their acceptance of the terms of the covenant (Ex. 24:3ff.; cf. Zech. 9:11 and vv. 19ff. below); and an altar was built again, for the offering of sacrifice, when the Israelites reaffirmed their allegiance to the covenant on the passing of the leadership from Moses to Joshua and the crossing of the Jordan into the land of promise (Dt. 27:1ff.). The new covenant has this in common with the old, that it too came into operation through the sacrificial death of an innocent victim on behalf of the people.  

By the suffering and death of Christ (which inevitably led to His glorious resurrection) Jesus forever conquered death for His people. “For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death…. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’ The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:25, 26, 54-57). The resurrection of believers is completely dependent upon union with Christ in His resurrection. But, in order to be raised, the Savior first had to suffer and die. Our immortality and incorruptibility had to be earned by the Redeemer. The Mediator had to die and be placed in the earth to be resurrected and bear great fruit unto God. We will receive resurrected bodies at the second coming of our Lord that are glorious, incorruptible, spiritual, and powerful because Jesus submitted to death and was raised. Christ died to save our bodies as well as our souls. The resurrection of the dead in Christ is called by Paul the “redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:23). The salvation which Jesus achieved by His suffering and death is comprehensive. He restores life to the dead first spiritually in regeneration and then physically at the resurrection. The Mediator had to die to make His victory over death complete and final. As Spurgeon so eloquently puts it,

As to death, ye know how our Lord vanquished him! By death he conquered death. When the hands were nailed, they became potent to fight with the grave; when the feet were fastened to the wood, then began they to trample on the sepulchre; when the death pangs began to thrill through every nerve of the Redeemer’s body, then his arrows shot through the loins of death, and when his anguished soul was ready to take its speedy flight, and leave his blessed corpse, then did the tyrant sustain a mortal wound. Our Lord’s entrance into the tomb was the taking possession of his enemies’ stronghold; his sleep within the sepulchre’s stony walls was the transformation of the prison into a couch of rest. But especially in the resurrection; when, because he could not be held by the bonds of death, neither could his soul be kept in Hades, he rose again in glory, then did he become the “death of death and hell’s destruction,” and rightfully was he acknowledged the plague of death and the destruction of the grave. As if to prove that he had the keys of the grave, Jesus passed in and passed out again, and he hath made free passage now for his people, free entrance, and free exit.

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Christ has conquered. His people are redeemed. Death is vanquished. The death and resurrection of the Redeemer give us a full participation in the glories of the blessed resurrection. Thanks be to God!

By His death on the cross, Jesus destroyed the prince of darkness and death, the devil. “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:14-15). Christ had to die on the cross to strip Satan of his power. He had to take upon Himself a true human nature to suffer and die as man in order to render the devil inefficient and powerless with regard to the children of God.

The devil is frustrated in two major ways. First, he goes about as a roaring lion seeking to spiritually devour the Savior’s people. But, because of the blood of the Redeemer he cannot prevail. “[T]hough the devil still lives, and constantly attempts our ruin, yet all his power to hurt us is destroyed or restrained.” The death of the Mediator has chained the great beast and now the gospel can triumph in all the nations of the earth. Jesus has power over the powers and principalities of darkness (Col. 2:15). They have been definitively defeated at the cross. The devil is entirely disappointed, baffled and defeated in all his attempts to strike at the elect. The cross of Christ has placed them safely in the hands of the Son and the Father (cf. Jn. 10:28-30).

Second, by enduring God’s judgment on the cross which is the sting of death, the Redeemer has liberated us from the fear of death and its bondage. What the devil had helped to create as an entrance into hell by the overthrow of the first Adam, the Savior by His expiatory death has converted into a gate of heaven. “Just as the scars which a soldier carries are no discredit or dishonor to him if received in an honorable cause, so the cross-sufferings of Christ instead of marking His defeat were, actually, a wondrous victory, for by them He overthrew the arch-enemy of God and man.” While it is true that we must experience the first death, the death of our bodies, we do so with the assurance that we will be standing face to face with Christ; that Jesus’ resurrection guarantees our resurrection unto life eternal and incorruptible. Therefore, with Paul we can say, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain…. To depart and be with Christ…is far better” (Phil. 1:21, 23).

We can approach the death of our bodies with a completely different attitude than the heathen who are stepping into the jaws of darkness, forsakenness and suffering. Because Christ went before us and conquered death and Satan, we face death without fear. Although unbelievers are usually unwilling to admit it, they go through life with a perpetual anxiety regarding death. Deep down they have a consciousness that the judgment of God rests upon them because of their sins and guilt. Their souls are tormented by the curse that will come upon them. They are perpetually stalked by the sting of death. Believers, however, know that because of Jesus, nothing, not even death, has the power to separate them from the love of God. “‘He who fears death or is not willing to die,’ says Luther, ‘is not sufficiently Christian. As yet such people lack faith in the resurrection, and love this life more than the life to come.’ Calvin writes similarly: ‘Although we must still meet death, let us nevertheless be calm and serene in living and dying, when we have Christ going before us. If anyone cannot set his mind at rest by disregarding death, that man should know that he has not yet gone far enough in the faith in Christ.’”

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707 John Calvin, Commentaries of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews, 72.
709 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, 114.
place your faith in the Savior you can rest assured because “death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54).

By His death on the cross Jesus breaks the power of sin in the life of the Christian. Paul writes, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together with the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin” (Rom. 6:1-6).

The New Testament emphasizes that our Lord’s suffering, death and resurrection are the source of a believer’s sanctification. There is a very real sense in which the decisive events that determine the Christian life all occurred in the past in redemptive history. There is a covenantal and vital union between Christ and His people. This vital union determines our death to sin and our life of holiness. The ethical imperatives in the epistles arise out of and are rooted in the gracious indicatives of the gospel. Jesus’ past is our past. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. Thus, Paul often bases his exhortations on the accomplished fact of union with Christ in His death and resurrection. “If then you were raised with Christ seek those things which are above where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God…. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:1-3; cf. 1 Pet. 1:2-4; 4:1-2; Rom. 6:1-7:6; 1 Cor. 1:2, 30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Tit. 2:13-14; Heb. 13:12; etc.).

Jesus not only atones for our sins and frees us from the law, but by virtue of our union with Him in His victory over sin and death, He also delivers us from the power of sin in us. Our union with Christ guarantees that we will receive the Holy Spirit who enables us to bear fruit unto God. Therefore, holiness does not come through legalism, self-helps or autonomous efforts to achieve holiness through law-keeping, but through Christ whose Spirit raises, renovates and works in our hearts so that we are enabled to more and more obey the moral law. “The letter kills but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). The Savior had to suffer, die and be raised to become “a life giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45). We are indwelt by the Spirit and sanctified because of our union with Christ. “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that as it is written, He who glories, let him glory in the LORD” (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

Paul says that through the death of Christ we have died to the law. “Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God” (Rom. 7:4). Believers have become dead to the law as a means of justification. Hodge writes,

He was put to death, and we in him. To be slain to the law, means to be freed from the law by death. Death, indeed, not our own, but ours vicariously, as we are crucified in Christ, who died on the cross in our behalf, in our stead. It is therefore added by the body of Christ, i.e. by his body as slain. He redeemed us from the law by death; “by being a curse,” Gal. iii.13; “by his blood,” Eph. i.7, ii.13; “by his flesh,” Eph ii.15; “by the cross,” Eph. ii.16; “by the body of his flesh,” Col. i.22. These are all equivalent expressions. They all teach the same doctrine, that
Christ bore our sins upon the tree; that his sufferings and death were a satisfaction to justice, and, being so intended and accepted, they effect our deliverance from the penalty of the law.\textsuperscript{710}

When we meditate upon the death of Christ, theologically, it is important that we keep in mind two important thoughts. First, the whole life of Jesus is part of the work of redemption and, therefore, the obedience, suffering and death of the Redeemer must be viewed organically as a seamless garment. Every aspect of His atoning work is absolutely essential. Second, there is a comprehensiveness to the Mediator’s atoning work that is often ignored or overlooked. The Savior’s redemptive work not only secures the removal of sin and the declaration that the believing sinner is justified or declared righteous before God, it also merits the application of redemption to the sinner as well (regeneration, sanctification and glorification). We are always to be looking to the person and work of Christ for everything.

(3) Is there any significance to the time that our Lord expired? As we have seen, Jesus was in complete control of the moment in which He died. There are three reasons why He yielded up His spirit at that particular time (around 3:00 pm). The first (which we have already considered) was that His redemptive sufferings were completed. The Savior endured exactly what was required to drink the cup of God’s wrath set before Him, no more and no less. Second, it was important that the death of Christ and the attending miraculous signs were public. If Jesus had died at 3:00 am instead of 3:00 pm very few people would have witnessed His death. The public nature of the Redeemer’s execution as a common criminal was important as an aspect of His humiliation. The reason the signs attending the crucifixion were public was that a non-public sign is a contradiction. Third, our Lord had to die on the cross sometime before sunset on Friday to fulfill the Old Covenant typology regarding an eighth day or the new first day of the week Sabbath. The Redeemer had to rise from the dead on Sunday; no other day would fulfill the many ceremonial ordinances regarding the number “8” which points to a new beginning--Christ’s redemptive recreation (read, Gen. 17:12; Lev. 14:10; 15:14; 23:36-40; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:20; Col. 1:15-18; Heb. 12:33; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 3:14).

(4) Regarding the actual physical reason that Jesus died, the Scriptures are silent. The Bible simply says that “He bowed his head, and gave up his spirit” (Jn. 19:30). There has been speculation that the agony of separation from the Father caused a broken heart. That is, the strong mental emotions lacerated or ruptured the walls of the Savior’s heart. Some doctors even argue “that the rupture of the heart would go far to account for the flow of blood and water from our Lord’s side, when pierced with a spear.”\textsuperscript{711} It may be that when Jesus dismissed His spirit that His heart simply stopped beating. In any case the important thing that God wants us to know is that Christ died for our sins. If God wanted us to know the precise physical cause of the Redeemer’s death, then He would have revealed that information to us in His infallible Word.

Conclusion

The death of Christ marks the end of the achievement of our redemption and is the focal point of history. What the first Adam had done because of his sin, Jesus gloriously overturned by His suffering and death. This is the gospel, or good news, for sinners. What the Savior did must always be in our thoughts. It must permeate our whole worldview and manner of living. It is the most important thing in the whole world. As Paul says, “And I, brethren, when I came to you,
did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1-2). Like Paul we should be obsessed with a clear biblical knowledge of and faith in the person and work of Christ. The centerpiece or axis for all of Paul’s thought and preaching was the Savior suffering and dying for our sins. “Paul had brought the message of salvation in simple terms that everyone in his audience could understand.” This should be a lesson to all of us that, as we apply the Word of God to every area of life—whether art, engineering, agriculture, ethics, or even politics—the cross of Christ must remain central. If you are not a Bible-believing Christian then you need to ask yourself, “What are all the riches, glories and pleasures of this present world compared with Christ and His gospel?” “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Mk. 8:36). If you believe in Christ you will be saved, but if you do not believe you will be condemned.

Chapter 21: God’s Commentary on the Finished Work of Christ—The Torn Curtain

Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many. (Mt. 27:50-53)

And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost. And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom. (Mk. 15:37-38)

And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. (Lk. 23:45)

Introduction

The gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us that the death of Christ was accompanied by miraculous signs. The very moment that our Lord’s lips are silent and He breathe His last breath, God begins to speak in the unmistakable language of supernatural wonders. There is the sign of rending of the veil in the temple from top to bottom (Mt. 27:51; Mk. 15:38), right down the middle (Lk. 23:45). Unlike Matthew and Mark which place this event chronologically in their accounts, Luke mentions it topically and places it after the three hours of darkness. There also are the miracles of the earthquake and the resurrection of many saints near the holy city. The earthquake, the rending of the rocky cliffs, the opening of the tombs and the resurrection of many saints are only recorded in Matthew’s gospel (27:51-53). Although the events have a certain order in Matthew’s narrative (1. rending of the veil, 2. earthquake, 3. rending of the rocks, 4. opening the tombs, 5. raising the dead saints), it is very likely that these events occurred simultaneously the moment that Jesus died.713

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712 Simon J. Kistemaker, 1 Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 72.
713 Regarding the Greek text in Matthew’s account, R. C. H. Lenski writes: “It has been long noted that the wording of this passage is both beautiful and highly impressive. Kai [and] after kai piles one great sign upon another. The
While these miracles are indeed awe-inspiring, we must not forget that their purpose is to point men to the Savior and His amazing work of redemption. They can be compared to little planets around a large brilliant sun or a circle of small, polished gems that surround a very large, flawless diamond. Spurgeon’s comments on this subject are noteworthy:

The more you think of the death of the Son of God, the more will you be amazed at it. As much as a miracle excels a common fact, so doth this wonder of wonders rise above all miracles of power. That the divine Lord, even though veiled in mortal flesh, should condescend to be subject to the power of death, so as to bow his head on the cross, and submit to be laid in the tomb, is among mysteries the greatest. The death of Jesus is the marvel of time and eternity, which as Aaron’s rod swallowed up the rest, takes up into itself all lesser marvels.  

God’s greatest work and historical achievement was the sacrificial death of His own Son.

The miracles that attend our Lord’s death are to focus our minds on the Redeemer’s perfect finished work by giving us God’s marvelous commentary on what the Mediator had just done. Interestingly, among the Jews, tales “were told of catastrophes occurring at the death of pious rabbis, especially those whose intercession had been vital to the world; on rare occasions, Greek writers also applied such stories to the deaths of prominent philosophers.” Thus, the marvels surrounding the death of Christ would have, at a minimum, communicated to the people, whether Jewish or Gentile, that this Man’s person and death were special and unique.

In order to properly consider the signs before us we will consider each sign in turn. Regarding the miracle of the split veil, there are three main areas to examine: (1) We need to determine the facts of precisely what occurred to the best of our ability (e.g., What was the curtain like? Which curtain was rent?). (2) What is the message that God is conveying to man by the rending of the veil? (3) What are some important applications that can be derived from our text?

The Torn Curtain

(1) As we examine the split veil we want to determine precisely what occurred. Therefore, we need to determine: which veil in the temple was rent by God; what this veil was like; what purpose this veil served in the temple; and, what the rending of the veil must have been like.

Scholars are divided over which veil was torn in the temple because the temple contained two curtains. There was the outer curtain which separated the sanctuary from the forecourt (cf. Ex. 26:37; 38:18; Num. 3:26). This exterior curtain (the outer veil) covered the entrance to the temple structure itself and would have been visible to everyone facing that side of the temple. The innermost curtain (cf. Heb. 6:19) or the “second” veil (cf. Heb. 9:3) was the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple.

The vast majority of commentators believe that the inner curtain was the one torn for the following reasons. First, the word used to describe the veil (Gk. katapetasma) most often refers to the innermost veil next to the Holy of Holies. Second, the author of Hebrews by the interjection idou [behold or lo] ushers them in, and they are certainly astounding” (The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel, 1125).

inspiration of the Holy Spirit interprets the suffering and death of Christ as the means by which believers enter the heavenly Holy of Holies. “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh” (Heb. 10:19-20; cf. 6:19; 9:3). At the exact moment that our Savior died (i.e. when the veil of His flesh was rent by death; when His soul was severed from His body) God ripped the curtain of the Holy of Holies in half. The symbolic significance of the tearing of the inner curtain during the precise moment that our Lord died is scripturally unmistakable. Jesus and His completed work of redemption are the opened curtain, gate or door by which we enter into heaven and the special presence of God.

To understand how dramatic the rending of the inner veil was, we need to know how magnificent a curtain was involved. The curtain before the Holy of Holies was “40 cubits (60 feet) long, and 20 (30 feet) wide, of the thickness of the palm of the hand, and wrought in 72 squares, which were joined together; and these Veils were so heavy, that, in the exaggerated language of the time, it needed 300 priests to manipulate each. If the Veil was at all such as is described in the Talmud, it could not have been rent in twain by a mere earthquake or the fall of the lintel, although its composition in squares fastened together might explain how the rent might be described in the Gospel.”

Exodus 26:31 says that the curtain was beautifully embroidered with blue, scarlet and purple thread. It was adorned with cherubim, who represented angelic guardians shielding access to a thrice holy God.

The purpose of the veil was to separate the special Shekinah presence of Jehovah from the people and even the regular priests who ministered in the temple. Only the high priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies behind the veil. This special entrance occurred only once each year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:2ff; Num. 18:7; Heb. 9:7). On this day the high priest would pull back the edge of the curtain and enter the most holy place with the blood of sacrifice for himself and the people of Israel; then, he would sprinkle it on and before the mercy seat. Under the Old Covenant administration the approach unto God was very restricted and this approach involved dread and fear. If any mistakes were made in the prescribed ritual whether intentional or not the person involved would be struck down by God. While the Day of Atonement pointed to Christ, the veil signified no admittance. The special approach to God was very rare and limited. To everyone (except the high priest once a year) the veil meant stay away; do not enter. God is holy and you are sinful and polluted. “The time when the high priest entered into it, it was indeed turned aside; whereon it immediately closed and forbade an entrance and a prospect unto others. Wherefore there could be no entrance into that holy place abiding, unless the veil was rent and torn in pieces, so that it could close no more.”

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716 Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 611. Josephus gives slightly smaller dimensions for the veil (55 cubits high and 16 wide, see Wars, 5, 5, 4) Edersheim believes there is strong historical evidence that something dramatic happened at the temple at this time: “That some great catastrophe, betokening the impending destruction of the Temple, had occurred in the Sanctuary about this very time, is confirmed by not less than four mutually independent testimonies: those of Tacitus [Hist. v. 13.], of Josephus [Jew. War vi. 5, 3.], of the Talmud [Jer. Yoma 43c; Yoma 39b], and of earliest Christian tradition [the uninspired non-canonical Gospel According to the Hebrews]. The most important of these are, of course, the Talmud and Josephus. The latter speaks of the mysterious extinction of the middle and chief light in the Golden Candlestick, forty years before the destruction of the Temple; and both he and the Talmud refer to a supernatural opening by themselves of the great Temple-gates that had been previously closed, which was regarded as a portent of the coming destruction of the Temple. We can scarcely doubt, that some historical fact must underlie so peculiar and widespread a tradition, and we cannot help feeling that it may be a distorted version of the occurrence of the rending of the Temple-Veil (or of its report) at the Crucifixion of Christ” (Ibid, 610).

The veil symbolized that under the Old Covenant administration the way to God was not yet opened. There was not yet a freedom of access directly to Jehovah for all men. This point is clearly brought out by the author of Hebrews. “Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing” (9:6-8). The Holy Spirit tells us that as long as that curtain remained in place men had no hope of immediate access to God. “[T]he whole church was forbidden the use of this way; and it was appointed for no other end but to signify that in due time there should be a way opened unto believers into the presence of God.”

The rending of the curtain that resulted from Jesus’ death means that, in the new and better covenantal era, “God’s people constitute a holy priesthood with full right of access into the divine presence (cf. Heb. 10:19ff.; 1 Pet. 2:5).”

The rending of the veil must have been a shocking, frightening and awesome event to the priests who were ministering in the temple. No wonder Matthew’s account “is ushered in with Behold: ‘Turn aside, and see this great sight, and be astonished at it.’” The curtain was ripped asunder from the very top to the bottom (Mt. 27:51; Mk. 15:38). Luke gives us the added detail that it was torn right down the middle (Lk. 23:45). The fact that the curtain was torn from the top to the bottom proves that the tearing was supernatural. Normally, when a curtain grows old and wears from repeated use, it virtually always frays and tears at the bottom not at the top. Also, it would never tear right down the middle. The priests who were ministering in the temple knew that this was the hand of God. The noise from the quick tearing of such a large and thick curtain would have been exceedingly loud and startling. This tearing occurred at the time of the offering of the evening incense and would have been witnessed by the offering priest and those who assisted him. The Holy of Holies that was not to be seen by men or ordinary priests was opened. The rent down the middle of the curtain would have exposed the whole room to those officiating at the incense altar which was near the veil. The multitudes of people that were gathered outside of the temple would have heard the sound of a loud tear. They would have seen the shocked look upon the faces of the priests that ministered at the temple. Word would have spread rapidly through Jerusalem that the veil to the Holy of Holies had been torn in the center from top to bottom; what a sobering and mysterious sign from God. The Nazarene yields up His spirit and at that very instant the ears of the priests are pierced by the sound of the great veil of separation tearing.

(2) In the split veil God was saying something to Israel and the world about the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. While there may be secondary meanings or applications of this great event, the central or primary meaning is that the Redeemer has opened forever the approach to God. The sacrificing of animals pointed to the way. But the death of Christ is the actual, true and

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718 Ibid, 504.
719 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, 323.
720 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:430. Interestingly, the Most Holy place behind the veil in the second Temple contained nothing. Alfred Edersheim says, “[A] large stone, on which the high-priest sprinkled the blood on the Day of Atonement,” occupied “the place where the ark with the mercy seat had stood” (The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Christ [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 58). When the Babylonians conquered Judah and destroyed the first temple built by Solomon in 586 B.C., they took everything out of the temple as booty. Apparently the mercy seat and the ark of the covenant that contained the Ten Commandments, the manna, and the flowered staff were never reconstructed. Josephus reports in his history of the Jewish War that when the Romans entered the Holy of Holies in A.D. 70 it was completely empty.
only way to God the Father. “If you desire to approach God, the death of Christ is the way to him. If you want the nearest access and the closest communion that a creature can have with his God, behold, the sacrifice of Christ reveals the way to you. Jesus not only says, ‘I am the Way,’ but, rending the veil, he makes the way. The veil of his flesh being rent, the way to God is made most clear to every believing soul…. He was not suffered by the Father to die without a miracle to show that he had made a way for sinners to draw near to God.”

When the Savior offered Himself on the cross making atonement for sin, His once and for all sacrifice for sin made an access with boldness into the gracious presence of God. Without His perfect work, “the law and its curse were like cherubim and flaming sword, that turned every way to keep sinners from drawing unto God.” God tore asunder the veil to say to us in dramatic, unmistakable language that He has accepted the perfect sacrifice of His Son. All the impediments and obstacles that stood in our path, that made access to God’s loving presence impossible, have been removed by the redemptive work of the Mediator. The author of Hebrews even says that we enter the Holiest with boldness by the blood of Jesus.

This remarkable statement tells us the great privilege of the gospel—that, because of Christ, in our salvation, our worship and our prayers we have a great liberty, boldness and confidence to enter into the favorable, loving presence of the Father. The Old Covenant had many boundaries because Jesus had not yet shed His blood. There were boundaries around Mount Sinai so that the people would not come too close to God’s special presence and perish. There were boundaries with the tabernacle and temple. There was a boundary for Gentiles. There was a boundary for the non-priestly Jews. There was even a boundary for the regular priests. “Now this whole temple really was a great fort, a bulwark. The middle court also was separated from the rest by a stone wall; placards of warning threatened the death penalty against the unqualified who came too near it. Hence this veil became a world issue. Heathendom was kept away from it, and the people of Israel too in its common ranks were prohibited from passing through it.” But with the death of Christ all believers, whether Jew or Gentile, whether minister or non-minister, have a right, title and liberty to directly approach God in heaven through Jesus. No longer is there a priestly hierarchy. No longer do men need the assistance of sinful, fallible, human mediators. What a glorious and blessed privilege! The Savior superseded the old levitical priesthood with its shadow rituals and its multiplicity of sacrifices by His once for all, all-sufficient sacrifice.

Also because of Jesus’ redemptive work, we approach God without dread, fear, or terror in our minds. Believers have not received “the spirit of bondage unto fear, but the Spirit of the Son, whereby with holy boldness they cry, ‘Abba, Father;’ for ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty’ [2 Cor. 3:17].” Only the precious blood of Christ could have achieved this. “Confidence in an access unto God not built on, not resolved into the blood of Christ, is but a daring presumption, which God abhors.” To seek access to God without going through the veil of Jesus’ sacrificial death is not only futile and ineffectual but it is also sinful. It essentially says that Christ is not the only way of entering everlasting life. It says the blood of the Redeemer is unnecessary and denies the necessity of the suffering and death of the Savior. It rejects the perfection and efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice. Such people trample the cross of Christ underfoot as

723 Klaas Schilder, Christ Crucified, 509.
725 Ibid, 6:504.
worthless. Our faith, trust and confidence must be directed to Jesus alone who was rent in His sacrifice and who alone is the door to the Father. The rent veil is a proclamation of grace. The Mediator has conquered. By keeping the law perfectly and enduring the curse, He has thrown the gate to heaven wide open to all who will believe in Him. “When sin is gone, the barrier is broken down, the unfathomable gulf is filled. Pardon, which removes sin, and justification, which brings righteousness, make up a deed of clearance so real and so complete that nothing now divides the sinner from his reconciled God.”

Commentators recognize that the rending of the curtain has other important, related secondary meanings and applications.

First, it was a sign of impending judgment upon the nation of Israel. The Jews’ rejection and murder of the Messiah was such a serious act of complete apostasy that it sealed the fate of their nation in A.D. 70. Following the mockery of Jesus regarding His ability to destroy the temple (Mk. 15:29; Mt. 27:40), the rending of the veil by God would have been interpreted by the Jews as an act of “divine vandalism.” It meant that Christ did indeed have power to destroy the temple. “Jesus’ death and the destruction of the formal structures of Judaism are inseparably bound together.” “With Jesus’ death, the old religious order comes to an end; those who have rejected Jesus, the religious leaders, have now been rejected by God.” While the tearing of the veil proclaimed grace to everyone throughout the world who would come to God through Jesus, it proclaimed judgment, disaster and death to those who had rejected the person and work of Christ. The Holy of Holies and the temple were the very heart of the Jewish nation. If the heart is destroyed the nation dies. The rending of the veil was a warning sign to the Jews that their only hope before God was to turn away from their apostate leaders toward Jesus of Nazareth.

Second, the rending of the veil signified that the whole levitical system of types, shadows and ceremonies had been superseded and put to an end by Christ’s work. God did not unhook the veil and carefully fold it up for use on another day; instead He violently ripped it in half. With the death of the Savior, God had no use at all for the old typical system. If God tears asunder one of the most important features of the temple cultus, then obviously all the secondary and minor features are put away also. “The ordinances of an earthly priesthood were rent with that veil. In token of the death of the ceremonial law, the soul of it quitted its sacred shrine, and left its bodily tabernacle as a dead thing. The legal dispensation is over.”

Third, the rending of the veil demonstrates that the special dwelling place of God is no longer restricted to a small nation in Palestine. The death of Christ is an event of world-wide historical significance. Inside the veil was the mercy seat, above which rested the Shekinah presence of God. In the Old Covenant God had limited His covenant blessings to one nation. If a foreigner or stranger wanted to join themselves to the covenant people they would have to become Israelites. Like Ruth they would have to move out of their own heathen nation to the land of Israel. But with Christ’s death and the resultant Pentecost, God moves outside the old veil and enters the entire world. In a sense the Holy of Holies and the temple go into all nations. “For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the

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728 William Lane, The Gospel of Mark, 575. Lane points out that the “early Church Fathers commonly interpreted the event as a warning sign of the impending destruction of the Temple…” (575).
Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations,’ says the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 1:11).

(3) There are some important applications that are based on this important section of Scripture. First, the rending of the veil demonstrates that Jesus is the only way to the Father. If men are to have fellowship with God they must pass through the rent veil of the Savior’s sacrificial death. If you place your trust in the person and work of Christ, the door to heaven stands wide open. You are free to enter because you have been washed by the Redeemer’s blood and clothed with His perfect righteousness. When you die God says, “Come up hither to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Enter beloved into My heavenly sanctuary to be forever in My loving presence.” But if you try to enter in by another way then you are without Christ, without the Father and without hope. You will die in your sins and the door to heaven will forever remain shut and locked to you. Oh that God would grant you the eyes of faith to see the beauty, perfection and sufficiency of Jesus and His work!

Second, the fact that God has ripped the curtain of the old order in half stands as a warning to all men who attempt to put it back together again by corrupt theology and worship. Dispensationalists attempt to repair the torn curtain by theorizing that the temple will be rebuilt and sacrifices reinstated as a memorial to Jesus in the millennium. They also rebuild the middle wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles by falsely teaching that God has two separate and distinct covenant peoples: the church and the Jews. Messianic Jews implicitly deny the rent veil by requiring circumcision and the old levitical holy days. Romanists deny God’s tearing of the veil by the mass, the holy days and the use of human priests as mediators between God and man. High-church professing Protestants deny the rent veil with their sacramentalism, holy days, church calendars and other coarse imitations of the beggarly elements. All semi-Pelagians and Arminians deny the rent veil by their synergistic doctrine of salvation. For them Jesus has torn the veil part of the way down and man must grab the curtain and tear it the rest of the way. Remember, God rent the veil without man’s help or assistance. Christ’s perfect work does not make access to God possible, but actually achieves access to God. We cannot come to God with the scissors of free will or the knife of good works, for this curtain can only be severed by the precious blood of Christ.

Third, the torn veil ought to greatly strengthen our faith in the Mediator as we seek to please God in our daily lives. The ripped curtain should lead to boldness in our approach unto God. By boldness we do not mean a reliance on human strength, arrogance, flippancy or carelessness, but rather boldness in resting on the person and work of the Savior. This boldness should affect our prayer life in that it flows from our faith in and meditation on the Redeemer’s victory. If we are neglecting our daily prayers or are not praying as we ought, then we are not living consistently with the reality of the torn veil. We need to rightly “esteem and duly improve the blessed privilege which was purchased for us at so dear a rate. What shall we render unto him? How unspeakable are our obligations unto faith and love!”731 “The Lord has blessed, and he will make you a blessing. Your ordinary conduct and conversation will be a blessed example; the words you speak for Jesus will be like a dew from the Lord: the sick will be comforted by your words; the despondent will be encouraged by your faith; the lukewarm will be recovered by your love.”732 The boldness which arises from the perfection of Jesus’ sacrifice should permeate every aspect of our Christian lives.

731 John Owen, An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 6:504.
Chapter 22: God’s Commentary on the Finished Work of Christ—The Earthquake and Tombs Opened

And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many. (Mt. 27:51-53)

Introduction

At the same moment that Jesus died and the veil was rent there was a great earthquake. This earthquake was miraculous and was probably limited to Jerusalem and its immediate vicinity or to the nation of Israel. (We have noted above that the Greek word ge can be translated “earth” [as in the whole world] or “land” which refers to a country or even a localized geographical area). This earthquake caused deep fissures in the rocks around Jerusalem. The Greek word petrai indicates that it was not detached boulders (petroi), but cliffs and masses of solid rock that were split apart by the violent shaking. Matthew uses the same verb (eschisthesan, “were split open”) to describe the rending of the rocky masses that he used to record the tearing of the veil (eschiste, “was split”). The evangelist records that the violent earthquake resulted in many of the tombs in the vicinity of Jerusalem (Mt. 27:53) being opened. Unlike modern burial plots, these tombs were hewn out of solid rock. The violent shaking rolled away stones and split open stone doors and walls. This miracle serves as a prelude to the resurrection of many of the saints and their exhibition to believers in the holy city.

The miracle of the earthquake with the opening of the tombs and the resurrection of many saints is so amazing that many commentators refuse to take this section of Scripture literally. A. B. Bruce believes it may belong to “the region of Christian legend.” A. Plummer thinks it has “a legendary element in it.” R. T. France says, “It is a matter of faith; not objective demonstration.” Many modern scholars believe “this passage is a piece of theology set forth as history.” David Hill says these signs reflect “a primitive tradition.” Donald A. Hagner thinks that the opening of the tombs suggested a resurrection to the early Christians and that “Matthew recorded the tradition, believing that it foreshadowed the reality of the eventual resurrection of the saints.” Daniel J. Harrington believes that Matthew may have inserted “an existing apocalyptic fragment based on Ezekiel 37 to underline the decisive significance of Jesus’ death.” W. C. Allen asserts that this incident “probably comes from Mt’s cycle of Palestinian traditions.” All such thinking denies the verbal plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures and must be rejected as speculations influenced by higher critical, modernist concepts.

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of Scripture. What Matthew recorded literally took place in history and must not be explained away as myth, legend, early tradition or theology masquerading as history. If the events that Matthew describes did not really happen in history, then they are not real signs and are not significant at all. The fact that they really did occur, points to the earth-shattering effects of the death of Christ. “This shows that the death of the Savior had—and still is having—significance for the entire universe.”

There are a number of things that need to be examined regarding these signs. (1) What is the significance of this powerful earthquake that splits apart rocks and opens tombs? Although the passage does not elaborate upon the meaning of the earthquake, the Old Testament can help us understand the message of this sign. Sometimes earthquakes were a sign of the presence and action of God in redemptive history. When God appeared on Mount Sinai to reveal His covenant law to the people, “the whole mountain quaked greatly” (Ex. 19:18). Sinai was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel (Ps. 68:9; cf. 6-7; 1 Kg. 19:11). With the death of Jesus the Mosaic covenant was fulfilled, the New Covenant established and the temple as God’s earthly throne room was abandoned for the worldwide church of Christ. It was therefore appropriate that the death of the Redeemer was accompanied by a great earthquake.

Scripture also connects earthquakes to God’s revelation of Himself as a righteous judge (e.g., Isa. 24:18-20; Jer. 10:10; Am. 8:8; Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, etc). Therefore, it makes sense that the rending of the veil and the earthquake were coterminous. Israel had violated God’s covenant to the point that she was rejected by God. Therefore, in “this way not only did the earth bear testimony to its Creator, but it was even called as a witness against the hardheartedness of a perverse nation; for it showed how monstrous that obstinacy must have been on which neither the earthquake nor the splitting of the rocks made any impression.”

The earthquake served as a woe which heralded an advent, as a sign of the coming of God with eschatological intent. God took this means to say to Israel that Golgotha was not a forgotten little place in which a certain case of a certain Nazarene had been executed; but that His death is a sharply accentuated moment in the day of the Lord, and a beginning of the last judgment. An earthquake always serves as a catastrophe of the last day in all advent-prophecy. This goes to prove once more that Golgotha is indeed a place of judgment, and that it was not an exaggeration but a declaration of the truth when we chose in this book to relate the events to catastrophes of judgment.

Further, the earthquake and the rending of the rocks points to the complete victory of Jesus’ sufferings and death which will shake the heavens and the earth. Haggai prophesied about the world-transforming power of the Redeemer’s atoning death when he said, “For thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Once (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,’ says the LORD of hosts” (2:6-7). (The author of Hebrews applies vs. 6 explicitly to Jesus Christ.) The Savior’s propitiatory death achieved a definitive victory which will be progressively accomplished in history and completed at the second coming. As a result of His redemptive obedience, our Lord is progressively establishing a new heavens and a new earth. The Mediator is removing those things that are being shaken and establishing a kingdom which cannot be shaken (cf. Heb. 12:26-28). Thus, the earthquake speaks judgment and doom to those


\[743\] Klaas Schilder, Christ Crucified, 518.
who refuse to bow the knee to Christ, while it speaks victory, grace and peace to believers. Jesus’
great power and sovereign authority are gloriously manifested in the earth-shattering change that
His completed work wrought by: the binding of Satan; the abrogation of the shadow ceremonies;
the coming of the Holy Spirit; and, the promulgation of the gospel.

(2) The resurrection of many saints raises a number of important questions that merit our
attention. First, when did the resurrection of these saints occur? Commentators are divided on
this issue because the Greek is somewhat ambiguous. The phrase “after His [Christ’s] resurrection” (v. 53) can be taken with the preceding participial clause and thus could mean that
these saints were raised and came out of their tombs after the resurrection of Jesus. Those who
favor this interpretation point out that 1 Corinthians 15:20 refers to our Lord as “the firstfruits of
those who have fallen asleep.” Further, Colossians 1:18 and Revelation 1:5 identify the Redeemer as “the firstborn from the dead.” Therefore, according to this view, it would be
theologically inappropriate for these saints to arise before the resurrection of Christ.

The phrase “after his resurrection” could also go with the verb that follows. This would
mean that the saints were raised the moment Jesus died, but did not enter the holy city until after
the resurrection of the Savior. Those who object to this interpretation usually raise a question
regarding the whereabouts of these saints from 3:00 pm on Friday to Sunday morning. What did
they do before they went into Jerusalem? (Some commentators argue that after the saints were
raised they remained concealed in their tombs until after the resurrection of Christ.)

Although both views are possible and acceptable interpretations, the second interpretation
is to be preferred for the following reasons. a) Matthew is setting forth signs that are clearly
associated with the death of the Redeemer. His account leaves the impression that all these signs
occurred virtually simultaneously. The appearance of the saints to believers in Jerusalem was not
in itself a miracle, but rather was the exhibition of a miracle. b) The objection that these saints
could not rise until after our Lord’s resurrection is not tenable. Even if these saints arose before
Christ’s resurrection they did so because of the efficacy of His death. “Jesus remains ‘the
Firstborn from the dead’ (Col. 1:18) because he alone conquered death, and even these saints
arose only through the blessed power of Jesus.”

744 We must remember that the Savior’s own resurrection is not an event unrelated to the cross, but was achieved and guaranteed by it. The Redeemer’s sacrificial death is the cause while the resurrection is the effect. “[T]he triumphant death and resurrection of Jesus remain the legal basis for the glorious resurrection even of the saints. Besides, the comparison in 1 Cor. 15:20, taking its point of departure in Christ’s resurrection, looks to the future, the second coming: in relation to all believers who will then arise, Jesus is the firstfruits.”

745 Further, Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kg. 2:11) both escaped death and ascended directly to heaven. This proves that the efficacy of the Mediator’s death and resurrection was not bound by time. These Old Testament saints escaped the jaws of death because of the Savior’s merits and not their own “good works.”

Second, what kind of resurrection is described by Matthew? The evangelist describes a
real bodily resurrection. He uses the expression, “many bodies” (polla somata), which refutes all
those who view the resurrection in purely spiritual or metaphysical manner (e.g., Gnostics, neo-
platonists, modernists, full-preterists, etc). The people who were raised are described as “the saints” (hoi hagioi). “The expression (hoi hagioi) is found nowhere else in the Gospels; and elsewhere in the N.T. it is used always of Christians (Act. ix.13, 41; Rom. xii.13, xv.25, 26, 31, etc).”  

It may be that these resurrected saints were Jewish Christians, such as Simeon, Anna, Zacharias and Elizabeth, who had recently perished. If these kinds of people were resurrected they would have been immediately recognized by friends and loved ones. It also could have been a sampling of believers from many periods of history. Matthew doesn’t elaborate on who these “holy ones” were. If the saints raised were notable historical persons such as Job, Moses, Abraham or Isaac, it is likely that they would have been identified by name. “[T]hose who lived and died before the death and resurrection of Christ, had saving benefit thereby, as well as those who have lived since; for he was the same yesterday that he is today, and will be forever, Heb. xiii.8.”

Regarding the specific nature of this resurrection Matthew is silent. Therefore, commentators are divided as to whether these saints were resurrected like Lazarus, who resumed a normal earthly existence and died of old age, or whether they received glorified spiritual bodies which were eventually received up into heaven. Given the fact that these saints were resurrected as a sign of the victory of the Redeemer’s sacrificial death and as a token of all believers, it is likely that they were resurrected with glorified bodies that could not die. “[I]t would appear to be absurd to suppose that, after having been once admitted by Christ to the participation of a new life, they again returned to dust.”

According to Hebrews 11 (cf. 11:13-16, 35, 39-40) the Old Testament saints all died looking forward to resurrection and a better life in a heavenly country. For a select group, this hope now comes to fruition with the death of Jesus.

Third, why did God only raise some saints to life when He could have raised all, now that the Redeemer’s vicarious suffering and death was accomplished? The answer to this question lies in the purpose of this resurrection. The purpose of this resurrection was to testify regarding the efficacy of the Savior’s suffering and death. It was designed to give the people of God an example of the new life which they ought to expect. “[I]n order that the minds of believers might be more quickly raised to hope, it was advantageous that the resurrection, which was common to all of them, should be tasted by a few.”

Further, the New Testament makes it abundantly clear that the final resurrection of the saints and their receiving glorified bodies occurs at the second bodily coming of Christ. Therefore, a resurrection of all would be premature. God ordained that in the salvation of His elect, which occurs over a long process of history, the final act in the application of redemption in the broadest sense of that term comes at the very end of human history. Therefore, in this resurrection of “many saints” around Jerusalem, God was giving His people a taste of the result of Christ’s redemptive work. Although their appearance on Sunday testified to the Redeemer’s resurrection, it also gave the church, which would soon be sorely persecuted, a glimpse of the end of history. Therefore, this resurrection looks back at the death of Jesus and looks forward to the complete victory of the cross at the consummation. This exhibition of the resurrected saints ought to give the church a great optimism as it battles the forces of evil and suffers affliction. It would be akin to the British troops at Dunkirk in 1940 getting a glimpse of the end result of World War II and seeing themselves marching in a victory parade in London.

747 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:432.
749 Ibid.
Fourth, why is it significant that only believers were raised? Our Lord is showing us that the benefits of His death and resurrection are applied only to His people and not unbelievers. The cross opens the prisons of our graves. It takes rotten flesh, old bones and even bodies obliterated into nothing but dust and makes them into perfect, beautiful, flawless, glorified, incorruptible bodies. Adam was formed from the dust of the ground and we shall be re-formed from the dust of death. Modernists, skeptics and full-preterists cannot accept this truth. But the eyes of faith know that our omnipotent Savior will have no difficulties with this miracle.

This miracle demonstrates the efficacy of Christ’s death to spiritually resurrect His own people. If the Redeemer can take the dust of a dead man and give it new glorified life, then can He not also raise up dead hearts of stone? These miracles that accompanied the death of the Savior prove that the resurrected, glorified Mediator will continue to exercise His great saving power throughout history until He comes again. “Rocky hearts are rent, graves of sin are opened, those who have been dead in trespasses and sins, and buried in sepulchers of lust and evil are quickened, and come out from among the dead, and go into the holy city, the New Jerusalem.”

“This is the wondrous work of the cross: it is by the death of our Lord that regeneration comes to men. There were no new births if it were not for that one death. If Jesus had not died, we…[would have] remained dead. If He had not there on the cross passed from among the living, we must have remained among the dead for ever and ever.”

“He didn’t die for Himself. He died to redeem His own from death and to give them resurrection unto life eternal.

(3) Whatever opinion one holds regarding the moment these saints were raised, there is no ambiguity as to when they made their appearance. Matthew says that “after His [Christ’s] resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared unto many” (27:53). This appearance raises a number of questions.

First, why did these saints wait until after Jesus arose to make their appearance? Apparently, God was teaching the believers in Jerusalem to view these saints’ resurrection as logically and theologically dependent upon Christ’s resurrection. “The disciples were thus taught to look on that resurrection, not as an isolated phenomenon; but as the ‘first fruits’ of the victory over death (1 Cor. 15:20), in which not they themselves only, but those also whom they had loved and lost were to be sharers.” Christians are always to look to the Redeemer as the Captain of salvation—the Lead Climber who opened the path into heaven before them. “These saints that arose, were the present trophies of the victory of Christ’s cross over the powers of death, which he thus made a show of openly.”

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751 Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Miracle of Our Lord’s Death,” 34:703. It is interesting that throughout history men have usually been very careful, respectful and ritualistic regarding the disposal of their dead. The almost universal use of grave plots with monuments and sepulchers that are often beautifully adorned reveals that man as a rational creature created in the image of God realizes deep down that: a) human remains ought to be respected and not treated as garbage; and b) there is some type of existence beyond the grave. The souls of men exist even when the physical body is dead. But, even given this recognition, men apart from a supernatural work of grace, do not prepare their souls to meet God by looking to Christ. It is the height of foolishness and absurdity when men take great care and expense to prepare a place where their bodies will rot, putrefy and then turn to dust but make no provision for the resting place of the soul.
753 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:432.
754 David Dickson, *Matthew*, 400.
God waited until the humiliation of His Son was ended before exhibiting the victory party in Jerusalem. If (as most commentators believe) these risen saints appeared only to Christians in Jerusalem, then their appearance after the glorification of the Mediator would be a celebration of victory by the saints in heaven and on earth. God brought together the saints from two separate realms to exult in the victory of Christ. The Redeemer, who now has all authority in heaven and on earth, brings heaven to earth and then earth to heaven. “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:22-24). Thus it happens that the first Sunday of the Christian church, the first Sabbath of the New Covenant era, is acknowledged and kept by the dead who were brought to life. And these glorified saints who died under the Old Covenant administration instruct the living by example and by teaching of the significance of this Christian Sunday-Sabbath and the restoration of all things by Christ’s victory.

Second, to whom did these risen saints make their appearance? Matthew simply says that the many which were raised went to the holy city and appeared unto many. Most scholars believe that the risen saints only appeared to believers because after His resurrection Jesus always appeared to Christians. He never showed Himself to unbelievers. Interestingly, unbelievers could look upon the cross and see the humiliation and suffering of the Savior. But they were not given the privilege of beholding the glorified exalted Redeemer. They will only see the Mediator on the final day of judgment as He sits upon His lustrous, white throne. They received the evidence of the empty tomb, Pentecost and the gospel preached. If these appearances followed Jesus’ pattern and example, then these risen saints would have appeared to believers to increase their faith, to lift up their sad hearts and to explain the accomplished redemption of the Lord. One can infer from the fact that all these saints went to the same city at the same time, that they were following specific instructions from Christ.

If these resurrected-glorified believers did appear to all, whether Christian or non-Christian, it would have caused widespread astonishment in the population and severe panic among the leadership. A reading of the early history of the church in Jerusalem in the book of Acts gives the distinct impression that the resurrection saints were not seen by unbelievers. If they had, it would have figured into the discussions of the Sanhedrin on how to stop this new, vibrant movement.

Third, why did these resurrected saints only appear in the city of Jerusalem? One reason is that this city had been set apart by God and chosen as the place for His special presence. It had been chosen by God and thus Matthew calls it the “holy city.” Its holiness obviously did not derive from the character of its populace, the vast majority of whom were wicked, but from its adoption by God. It was the center of the Jewish religion and the capital of the Hebrew nation. Therefore, Jesus designated this city as the starting point for the spread of the gospel after His resurrection. “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Ac. 1:8). According to Luke this is precisely what happened: powerful gospel preaching began in Jerusalem (Ac. 2:1); then went into Judea and Samaria (Ac. 8:5); and, subsequently went deep into the Gentile world (Ac. 8:26ff.).

Another reason is that Jerusalem and its immediate vicinity is the stage in which the whole passion of Christ was played out. His arrest, trial, conviction, torture, crucifixion and death were well known in the holy city, but not yet in the countryside. Therefore, it makes
perfect sense that the great victory of the Savior’s death and resurrection was first explained to people who were the immediate witnesses of these redemptive events.

Chapter 23: Reaction to the Death of Christ and the Accompanying Phenomenon

Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, “Truly this was the Son of God.” And many women were there beholding afar off, which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him: Among which was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s children. (Mt. 27:54-56)

And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out, and gave up the ghost, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God.” There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome; (Who also, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered unto him;) and many other women which came up with him unto Jerusalem. (Mk. 15:39-41)

Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, “Certainly this was a righteous man.” And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned. And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things. (Lk. 23:47-49)

Introduction

After the death of Christ and the amazing signs that accompany His death, the synoptic gospels record the reaction of those present at the crucifixion. There is the reaction of the centurion (Mk. 15:39; Lk. 23:47) and his soldiers (Mt. 27:54). There is the response of the Jewish crowd or “all the people that came together to that sight” (Lk. 23:48). Also, there is a record of what the disciples or friends of Jesus (mostly female followers from Galilee) were doing at that time. Therefore, the gospel narratives shift from the death of Jesus, to the response of the Father, to the response of the people. The death of the Savior is of such a cosmic significance that the evangelists make a record of the response from both heaven and earth. In order to carefully examine these responses we will consider each one separately.

The Centurion’s Declaration

As we study the centurion’s response there are three things that merit our attention. First, the centurion’s statement is a response to the events he had just witnessed. By events we mean much more than the mighty miracles which struck great fear into the centurion and his soldiers (Mt. 27:54). Mark notes that the manner in which Jesus died had a profound effect upon him (Mk. 15:39). Luke simply says, “When the centurion saw what was done (23:47). Therefore, we
are justified in viewing the centurion’s declaration as flowing from a rather broad pool of information.755

As a centurion (i.e. an officer over a hundred men) this man was present at the trial of Christ. He had heard the accusations and the words of Jesus. As the Roman officer in charge of carrying out the execution of the Redeemer, he had witnessed all the events of those six cruel hours. He had watched the mocking and had also witnessed the Savior’s remarkable demeanor. Our Lord was calm, dignified and resolute as He hung on the gibbet. He had observed the marvelous interaction between the Mediator and the criminal who was converted on the cross. He had heard the promise of paradise to the dying thief. Then, he watched with amazement as the bright noon sun vanished behind a veil of complete darkness. As he saw the manner in which the Nazarene perished, he knew that Jesus had not died the normal death of crucified men. Not only had Christ died when he still possessed great strength, but He did something no man had the ability to do. He dismissed His spirit and sent it into the hands of God. “In Mark’s account the reason for the exclamation is unmistakably the manner of Jesus’ death…”756 Then, as our Lord gave up His spirit, the centurion witnessed a great earthquake that split apart rocky cliffs and opened many tombs. Matthew says that at this point the centurion and his soldiers “became terribly afraid” (ephobethesan sphodra). It is as a result of the centurion’s reflection “on the earthquake and those things that were done” (Mt. 27:54) that he makes his great declaration.

One could even say that his great fear was rooted not merely in the astonishing signs that he had witnessed; but also, in his realization that he had taken part in a great injustice against a man who was not only innocent, but who was obviously much more than a mere man. He had participated or at least had permitted Christ to be beaten and mocked by his soldiers (Jn. 19:1-3; Mk. 15:15-20; Mt. 27:26-31). He stood by when the Savior’s clothes were divided. He had witnessed the pounding of the nails into the Redeemer’s hands and feet. Along with his soldiers the centurion had reviled and insulted the Savior as He hung on the cross (Lk. 23:36-37). But now the centurion and his quaternion of executioners came to the obvious conclusion that Jesus had power over death, the shining rays of the sun and even the fabric of creation itself. All this astonished them and their consciences were now tormenting them for what they had done.

Second, the centurion “glorified God” (Lk. 23:47) by confessing the truth about Christ. If we combine Luke’s account with that of Matthew and Mark we see two elements to the centurion’s declaration.

a) He says of Jesus that “certainly He was a righteous man” (Lk. 23:47). The Greek word translated righteous (dikaios) can have different yet related senses depending on the context. When a Christian, with a full knowledge of Scripture, says that Christ was righteous he virtually always means that our Lord lived a life of moral perfection in thought, word and deed and, as God, was and is infinitely righteous in His being. The centurion being a pagan, probably from one of the surrounding countries (e.g., Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, etc), would almost certainly not have had that depth of theology behind his declaration. Therefore, when he says that the Nazarene was righteous (dikaios), he is declaring that the Savior is completely innocent before the charges of man and stands in a right relationship to God. All the charges brought against this Man were false; they had absolutely no basis in reality whatsoever. And by these amazing signs

755 “O parestekos ex enantias autou, ‘who stood opposite him,’ should be taken to mean that the centurion is standing before Jesus, as opposed to behind him or off to the side” (Craig A. Evans, Mark 8:27-16:20, 510). “Being on duty, he had stood facing the crosses, and nothing had escaped him” (Henry Barclay Swete, Commentary on Mark, 389).
we can all readily see that God Himself regards this Man as completely innocent. Thus, the centurion (perhaps unwittingly) is confessing that Jesus did not die for His own sins, but for the sins of others. “Christ was righteous, in that His claim, for which He was executed, was sustained by God, by the supernatural phenomena…. Christ had a testimony of His innocency and righteousness given by all sorts of persons. Pilate and Herod pronounced Him innocent; Pilate’s wife proclaimed Him a righteous person; Judas, the traitor, declared it was innocent blood; the thief on the cross affirmed He had done nothing censurable; and the centurion owned Him to be a righteous man, yea, the Son of God.”

b) The centurion also said, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mk. 15:39; cf. Mt. 27:54). Without question the centurion was heralding the divinity of Jesus by his statement. We know this because, among his pagan contemporaries, “the designation ‘Son of God’ had been arrogated for the Roman ruler, who was worshipped in the state cult.” The question that is more difficult to answer is related to the worldview behind this declaration. Was the centurion’s statement a confession from a brand new believer in Christ who was saying that in a unique sense Jesus was the Son of God? Or, as a Gentile army officer (who had no previous connection with the Savior or His disciples) was he simply acknowledging that the Nazarene “transcends humanity” and must be categorized among the gods? Matthew notes that the soldiers also made this confession. Were these soldiers genuinely converted or did they confess the truth without a Scriptural understanding of exactly who Jesus really was? The gospels give no definitive answer to this question.

Some scholars have seized on the fact that in the Greek language the word “god” and the word “son” are used without the definite article. Therefore, they argue that the centurion and his soldiers are saying, “a son of a god.” The problem with this argument is that as far as Greek grammar is concerned the centurion’s statement can be translated as indefinite or definite (the Son of God). If the soldier spoke in Latin, which is likely, there “was no more definite expression than Filius Dei, the language having no such part as the definite article.” Further, (and this point is decisive) the gospel writers themselves sometimes use the article and sometimes do not when referring to Christ. When the angels of God (Lk. 1:35), Jesus Himself (Mt. 27:43), the apostles (Mt. 14:33) and the unbelieving Jewish mob (Jn. 19:7) refer to the Messiah as God’s Son, they do not use the article. When Peter makes his great confession (Mt. 16:16) and when the high priest asks our Lord, “Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God” (Mt. 26:63), both use the article. Obviously, when the angels, the apostles and Christ do not use the article, they do not mean that our Lord is “a son of a god.” Hagner writes, “Although technically the translation ‘a son of God’ is possible since no definite article is present, the technical expression already carries a definiteness by its previous use in the Gospel [of Matthew] (see too the lack of the definite article in 4:3, 6; 27:40, 43). This is the assessment of Jesus at the climax of his earthly work, and it is virtually impossible that Matthew means us to understand the confession to be that he was merely a son of God.”

While the vast majority of commentators (including John Calvin) believe that the centurion’s statement does not reflect a genuine conversion of an orthodox Christology, the

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759 J. A. Alexander, Mark, 429.
760 Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 852.
761 Calvin writes, “It was only a sudden and transitory impulse, as it frequently happens, that men who are thoughtless and devoted to the world are struck with the fear of God, when he makes an alarming display of his power; but as they have no living root, indifference quickly follows, and puts an end to that feeling. The centurion
possibility of these things should not be ruled out. In fact, there are a number of arguments that favor the centurion’s true conversion.

a) The centurion may have been stationed in Jerusalem for some time. He knew that the Jews only believed in one true God. He very likely knew of the Jews’ accusation against Jesus. Therefore, he knew that the Sanhedrin was not accusing our Lord of being “a son of a god,” but of being “the Son of the one true God.” Further, he had heard the related derision of the crowds at Calvary and had witnessed the Savior say, “Father, into thy hands I commend My spirit” (Lk. 23:46). Therefore, it is at least possible that his declaration reflected a biblical-theological outlook and not a heathen world view. Romans knew that the Jews considered them to be pagan idolaters. Therefore, why would he assume that the Jewish Messiah was simply another divine being?

b) The expression “Son of God” (Latin, Filius Dei) was at that time reserved for Caesar. “In calling Jesus the ‘Son of God,’ the centurion has switched his allegiance from Caesar, the official ‘Son of God,’ to Jesus, the real Son of God…. The centurion now ascribes to Jesus what he had earlier ascribed to Caesar: Caesar is not divi filius, ‘Son of God’ (alluding to the title of the great emperor Augustus), but Jesus is.”762 The centurion’s and his soldiers’ acknowledgment of Christ as the Son of God was in essence an act of treason against the Roman state embodied in the “divine” emperor. Therefore, it is not likely that these men were simply referring to the Savior as the offspring of a deity in the pagan sense.

c) The conversion of centurions to Christ is not without precedent in the New Testament. There is the centurion who asked the Savior to heal his servant at a distance (Lk. 7:7; Mt. 8:8); of whom our Lord said, “I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!” (Lk. 7:9). There also was Cornelius, “a devout man who feared God” (Ac. 10:2), who believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit (Ac. 10:44). If the synoptic gospels are making an implicit statement of the Gentiles’ willingness to believe in the Messiah in contrast to the Jewish rejection of Christ, then a real conversion on the part of the centurion is more fitting.

d) It is very likely that the early readers of the gospels would have understood the centurion’s declaration as a confession of faith on the lips of a Gentile. “The fact that the truth of Jesus’ person was publicly declared, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by a Roman was undoubtedly important to the Christians at Rome.”763 There is no doubt that to the Christian readers of the gospels, the centurion’s declaration of truth would form a sort of climax to the great scene of the crucifixion. If the declaration is meant to be taken in the unique sense, which it no doubt was, then it seems more appropriate that this great confession was not simply an excited statement rooted in pagan mythology. As Lenski notes, “Did the evangelists know the emptiness of this officer’s confession and nevertheless record it when it really meant nothing for had not undergone such a change as to dedicate himself to God for the remainder of his life, but was only for a moment the herald of the divinity of Christ” (Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, 3:327). This is essentially the view of John Gill, James Morison, Marvin R. Vincent, Alfred Plummer, Craig A. Evans, R. T. France, Alfred Nevin, Leon Morris, R. Alan Cole, Ezra P. Gould, Samuel J. Andrews and others. According to ancient tradition, the centurion’s name was Longinus and as a result of his experience became a dedicated Christian and a martyr (Chrys. hom. in Mt. ad 1).

762 Craig A. Evans, Mark 8:27-16:20, 510.
763 William Lane, The Gospel of Mark, 576. R. T. France concurs, “It is Mark’s readers for whom it matters, and for them, after so many and varied declarations already in the gospel that Jesus is the Son of God in the unique sense (1:1; 1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:6; 13:32; 14:61-62), there can be no question. Whether or not they realized that the centurion was unlikely to have grasped the theological significance of the words he uttered, for them this is the final declaration, at the moment of his apparent failure, that Jesus is the true Son of God, fulfilling on the cross his Father’s will” (The Gospel of Mark, 660).
true believers? Did they not know that their record would be understood as referring to the deity of Jesus whereas the centurion had [only]...a pagan notion? Surely, the evangelists would have not tricked their readers.”

“The centurion agrees with the malefactor in regard to whom and what Jesus was. Why reduce these confessions to the lowest possible level? If they amounted to next to nothing, why were the inspired writers allowed to set them down for all time? The Christian view [at least the ancient view] is to let these confessions stand in their full weight.”

Further, could Luke say the centurion “glorified God” (23:47) by making a statement that was objectively true, but subjectively in error? At any rate, these are questions that have been neglected by many scholars.

If the Holy Spirit wrought a genuine conversion in the centurion and his soldiers, then this confession is quite remarkable. This would mean that the very men who were in charge of executing Jesus, who earlier had tortured, mocked, spit upon, and nailed to the cross the suffering Servant, were saved by the very Person they had mistreated and murdered. The grace of God and love of Christ are unfathomable. There is no sin or injustice too great for the cleansing blood of the Savior. “Christ’s love is such that when sinners are doing him all the dishonor they can, he will reveal himself to them and overcome them with free love: for here is a centurion and other soldiers with him turned subjects to him, and confessors of his name: even when he is hanging dead on the cross, life springs forth of him to open the eyes of these soldiers to see his Godhead, and gives them courage to confess it in his deepest humiliation.”

Third, the declaration of the centurion serves two purposes in the gospel narratives. a) It serves as a public indication of the truth regarding Jesus by a credible eyewitness of the day’s events. The centurion was not a Jew with a hard-hearted bias against Christ. Neither was he a disciple who already believed in and loved the Savior. He was a pagan who had to be there because it was his job. He stood there right in front of the three crosses and witnessed the whole day’s events. What was his conclusion? The Nazarene was truly righteous or innocent and, without question, He was the Son of God. The Jewish leaders were wrong; the mocking crowd was in error. Even the centurion himself and his soldiers who were caught up in the spirit of verbal venom, hatred and derision were mistaken. Jesus is righteous; He is God’s Son. He was crucified unjustly. He is worthy of our utmost allegiance.

b) The response of the centurion gives us a prelude to the success of the gospel among the Gentiles. “What the Jewish leaders have denied and declared to be blasphemy and even the disciples have not yet grasped, this ordinary soldier perceives in the unlikely context of Jesus’ [apparent] final defeat and death. He speaks necessarily in the past tense, since Jesus has now died: his manner of death has proved the truth about what he has been in life.” The centurion publicly confessed what the chief priests, scribes, elders and mob denied. The parable of the wedding feast was about to become a permanent reality for the visible church. Because the Jews had emphatically and brutally rejected their Messiah, God would invite all into His kingdom, even Gentile heathens. And ever since the death of Christ, “it has often happened that the most abandoned and profane have acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God while their religious rulers have denied his divinity.”

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766 David Dickson, Matthew, 402.
767 “Polybius (vi. 24) tells us what solid and strong characters were looked for in those who were promoted to be centurions” (Alfred Plummer, An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew, 404).
rabbis,”770 for the latter have had the truth and rejected it, while the former have lived in ignorance of revealed religion. In our day, when the Western nations who once were saturated with biblical truth have turned away from it, the task of gospel preaching is humanly speaking much more difficult.

The People’s Reaction

And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned. (Lk. 23:48)

Of all the gospels only Luke records the response of the multitude that surrounded Calvary. This was the large crowd that had come to watch the crucifixion of Jesus.771 This was the mob that assembled around the cranium-shaped rock to express their furious hatred and rage against the dying Savior—the One they had rejected for a despicable brigand and murderer. There are a number of things to note regarding this incident.

First, note their remarkable change of attitude and behavior. This crowd (or at least the majority of it) had come to Golgotha to take great pleasure in the suffering, humiliation and death of Jesus. These were the Jews of Jerusalem who followed the lead of their religious and political leaders and rejected Christ as a pretender, a false prophet, a blasphemer and a sorcerer. They were not shocked by the scene of crucifixion, but rather relished it. They looked upon the bleeding Savior with smiles on their faces, with mocking eyes and scornful lips. They spent their time laughing and heaping insults upon the Mediator, exulting over the pain and agony of the defenseless Man who hung before them. As far as they were concerned, the Nazarene was now defeated, finished and would soon be forgotten.

But a number of things occurred that day that had a profound impact on their demeanor. The spectacle of the bright noonday sun being veiled in pitch blackness caused their hearts to tremble and at least temporarily caused their mockeries to cease. The death of Christ with the violent earthquake, the splitting of the cliffs and the opening of the tombs caused an even more profound soul shock. They were struck with terror and dread. They began to regret their cruel mockeries. Their attitude was very different than it had been hours earlier when they had abused the Savior as wild beasts circle a wounded lamb. “Observe the power which God hath over human minds! See how he can tame the wildest, and make the most malicious and proud to cower down at his feet when he doth but manifest himself in the wonders of nature!”772

The crowd now exhibited deep sorrow for what had occurred. Luke says they were “beating their breasts” (v. 48). The expression “beating their breasts” in Jewish culture at that time denotes profound sorrow and self-reproach. It is the same terminology used of the publican who “smote his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner’” (Lk. 18:13). While there are no indications that this crowd now believed that Jesus was the Messiah or the Son of God; nevertheless, the signs that accompanied the crucifixion and death of the Savior produced profound regret in this multitude for their participation in the crucifixion and their derision of the

770 David Dickson, Matthew, 401.

771 Regarding Luke 23:48 Lenski writes, “The plural ‘multitudes’ is correct, for the city was filled, not with thousands, but with tens of thousands. Thus great crowds ‘came along together for the spectacle,’ theoria is found only here in the New Testament but is otherwise used to designate a theatrical show. Yet when these crowds saw the show, viewed the spectacle of what occurred, even they were struck in their hearts…. They came to witness a show, they left with feelings of woe” (The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel, 1156-1157).

Nazarene in His agonies. Perhaps they thought they had put to death a prophet. They very likely believed that they were now under God’s holy displeasure and that some horrible judgment awaited them.

Second, note that their sorrow did not result in a confession of Christ or a plea for pardon. These people were convicted by what they saw and expressed remorse; but, they exhibited no signs of saving faith or genuine repentance. We know that their sorrow did not result in immediate, large scale conversions to Jesus because about forty days later, as related in the book of Acts, the church in Jerusalem consisted of only one hundred and twenty persons (Ac. 1:15), many from the region of Galilee. The crowd experienced great emotion. They beat their breasts and shed some tears; but, they did not look to the Redeemer as the propitiation of their sins. They pitied Him as a prophet or a common martyr. They smote their breasts and then returned to their homes. “They did not show any further token of respect to Christ, nor enquire more concerning him, but went home; and we have reason to fear that in a little time they quite [soon] forgot it.”

The crowd may have been willing to acknowledge a few specific sins regarding their treatment of the Nazarene. But, there was no real sorrow for a life of sin and guilt against God. Perhaps they were thinking, “Yes, we made a mistake. We followed the lead of our Rabbis, scholars and leaders. But, in sum and substance we are good, religious people. Let us return to our homes and to life as it was before.” The feeling of great sorrow that they experienced for oppressing the innocent soon passed away as they returned to the business of everyday life. Therefore, from a spiritual standpoint, their deep experience of emotions was absolutely worthless.

The people’s consciences were deeply affected by what they saw. God has given man a conscience, so that when a grievous wrong has been committed he will repent and make amends of the situation. But tragically, after the fall, because of man’s sin, moral pollution and spiritual blindness, men have become experts at avoiding responsibility and soothing guilty consciences with all sorts of twisted reasoning and pitiful excuses. Therefore, one day the multitudes could tremble with guilt and fear and only a few days later their troubled consciences are quieted by perverse inward arguments and worldly cares. As useful as a pricked conscience is when evil has been committed, it cannot lead a dead soul into life, convert a man, or lead him to Christ. It is only when darkened and dead hearts are raised to life by the Holy Spirit in regeneration that the guilty conscience is drawn away from excuses and slavery to sin toward Jesus Christ. Only the cleansing blood of our Savior can truly alleviate a guilty conscience.

Third, we must learn from the response of this large Jewish crowd that emotion alone, even if it is the appropriate emotion, is not a trustworthy guide in discerning saving faith and evangelical repentance. Many people have sat under solid gospel preaching and have been deeply affected by it. They have shed tears and wept for the bloodied, beaten, tortured, spittle-covered, disfigured Messiah. But when they return home, they go on with their lives as though nothing has happened at all. Their emotion was temporary and fleeting. Likewise, regarding the crowd at Calvary, Calvin writes,

But as they went no farther, their lamentation was of no avail; unless, perhaps, in some persons it was the commencement or preparation of true repentance. And since nothing more is described to us than the lamentation which God drew from them to the glory of his son, let us learn by this example, that it is of little importance, or of no importance at all, if a man is struck

Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:830.
with terror, when he sees before his eyes the power of God, until, after the astonishment has been abated, the fear of God remains calmly in his heart. 774

The crowd’s strong emotions should have led them to acknowledge their sin, confess their sin to God and plead with God to forgive their iniquities on account of the sacrificial death of Christ. But tragically, the people who surrounded the cross on that day either did not have a biblical understanding of who Jesus really was; were unwilling to accept the claim that this man was the Son of God; or, they had an intellectual understanding of the truth but were unwilling to commit themselves to the truth. Without a biblical understanding of Jesus and His work or a faith commitment to Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God, the only thing that people can do is have an emotional experience and then go home. It is for this reason that we must behold the cross of Christ through the lens of Scripture and with the eyes of faith. Yes, look upon the bleeding Savior, shed tears and beat your breast; but, do so with a full biblical knowledge of why the Redeemer had to suffer and die. Then, use those emotions to deepen your love and commitment to the Mediator. Our emotions must be grounded upon biblical truth, guided by a scripturally informed intellect and then acted upon by a sanctified, submissive will. It is not enough to be emotional about or even sorry for one’s sinful behavior. Everyone must believe and repent. The crowd should have confessed their sin, trusted in Christ and become followers of Him.

Fourth, it is indeed probable that the witnessing of the events on Golgotha and the attending strong emotions of sorrow and regret on the part of the people were used by God on the day of Pentecost to convict at least some of these witnesses of their need for Christ. In his Pentecost sermon Peter twice reminds the assembled crowd that they were directly responsible for the crucifixion and death of Jesus (Ac. 2:23, 36). Peter was aggravating the emotional wound they experienced that day. He was bringing to remembrance their knowledge of their own guilt in helping convict and murder a righteous, innocent Man. He purposefully was troubling their souls with their own sinfulness to make them miserable once again. Peter was applying their guilt and wickedness to their consciences so effectively that Luke says “they were cut to the heart” (Ac. 2:37). This time, however, they did not just return home, but “said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what must we do?’” (Ac. 2:37). “This explains, at least to some extent, why on the Day of Pentecost there were no less than three thousand conversions. It may also go far to explain the temporary hesitancy on the part of the Jewish authorities [at this early stage of the church] to persecute the followers of Jesus.” 775 On the day of Pentecost many of those who had beat their breasts at the crucifixion were converted because the Holy Spirit took their sorrow, which before was worldly and indifferent, and made it into a godly sorrow that leads a person to repentance (see 2 Cor. 7:9-11).

The Reaction of Jesus’ Friends

But all His acquaintances, and the women who followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things. (Lk. 23:49; cf. Mt. 27:55-56; Mk. 40-41)

After describing the reaction of the centurion and his soldiers, as well as the multitudes, the synoptic gospels focus their attention on the Savior’s friends or disciples who were at the crucifixion. There are a number of noteworthy things regarding these passages.

First, all three evangelists focus their attention on the fact that this group was composed primarily of women. Mark says there “were women” (15:40), identifies a few of the prominent members of the group, and then says there were “many other women which came up” (15:41). Matthew says “many women” (27:55) and identifies the same three notable women, substituting “the mother of the sons of Zebedee” for Mark’s “Salome.” Luke says “all His acquaintances, and the women” (23:47). Matthew and Mark do not mention any men at all while Luke’s term “acquaintances” does indicate some men were present. (We know from John 19:26 that the apostle John was among this group.) Why the focus on these women? Why were none of the men identified while certain of the women were?

One reason that the synoptics (especially Matthew and Mark who only mention women) focus on these women is to contrast their faithfulness with the failure of the apostles (with the exception of John) to stand by Christ in His time of suffering and serve as crucial eyewitnesses to the work of redemption. The disciples’ weak faith and courage failed them and thus they deserted Jesus, while these women boldly stuck to the Savior no matter what the danger. “Note, even those of the weaker sex are often, by the grace of God, made strong in faith, that Christ’s strength may be made perfect in weakness.”

Another reason is that the mentioning of the women serves as a link to the burial and resurrection which is soon to follow. Some of these dedicated women will be eyewitnesses to every important redemptive event. Luke says, “The women from Galilee…beheld the tomb and how the body was laid” (23:55). Matthew and Mark identify Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses as eyewitnesses of the burial (Mt. 27:61; Mk. 15:47). These women were among those to witness the crucifixion (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses and Salome [the mother of the sons of Zebedee]; Mt. 27:56; Mk. 15:40). Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome were the first disciples to see the empty tomb (Mk. 16:1; Mt. 28:1). These women saw Jesus die. They witnessed the burial and saw the open sepulcher. They told the apostles what they had seen and the evangelists who wrote the gospels no doubt interviewed these women because they had witnessed these redemptive events. The gospel writers give these women a special note of recognition because their faithfulness to Christ enabled them to be eyewitnesses of the suffering, crucifixion and death of the Savior.

Second, (as noted) all the synoptics emphasize that these women were observers or witnesses to these events. Matthew and Mark say the women were beholding from afar (Mt.

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776 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:433.
779 Luke 24:9-10 indicates that these women were not the only female witnesses to the empty tomb. Verse 10 says literally “and the other women with them.”
The verb “were beholding” (ethoroun) is in the imperfect tense and “implies steady and careful contemplation. They took careful note.” Luke says that they “stood afar off seeing these things” (23:49). The centurion declares the truth regarding Christ and the crowds wail and beat their breasts. But these women are noted for their observing. Nothing is said about what they felt, thought or spoke. The evangelists simply want us to know them as witnesses. With the Savior in the clutches of His enemies, surrounded by Roman soldiers and dying on the cross, there is nothing that these women could do at that time but watch. However, given the historical nature of the gospel; their role as witnesses to the crucifixion and the events that follow; their presence as observers is very important.

It is significant that the evangelists draw the curtain on the final scene of the crucifixion and death of Jesus with our Lord’s most faithful disciples standing at a distance, beholding these momentous events. This group from Galilee believed in the Savior and loved Him dearly; but, they did not yet comprehend everything before them. They certainly were not expecting the Mediator to rise from the dead early Sunday morning. But, their faith and love for Jesus kept these pious women at Calvary. Although their understanding at this time was incomplete, they never stopped looking to the Savior. This is a scene of faith, courage, love and anticipation. These women were probably not sure what to do or think, so they did the only safe, logical thing to do. They looked to Christ. What a blessed example they are for all believers!

The synoptic gospels note that they were beholding from afar. This observation does not mean that the whole group always watched from that vantage point; for earlier at least some of these women and John were very close to the cross, close enough for Jesus to speak to His mother and John (Jn. 19:25-27). They likely stood afar off at this time because of necessity. The soldiers kept a space free around the crosses and this space may have been increased due to the terrifying signs. Further, there were large crowds to contend with. The watching from afar should be seen not as a sign of fear, but as an unavoidable circumstance.

Third, the evangelists emphasize the women’s love and dedication to Christ by noting that these women had followed Him from Galilee and had ministered to Him (Mt. 27:55; Mk. 15:41; Lk. 23:49). These women served as a support group for the Redeemer during His Galilean ministry. They “had not only provided material help, but also ekolouthoun auto [followed Him]; this is the language of discipleship, and suggests that they, like the Twelve, were regular members of the group.”

“They seem to have been possessed of material ‘means,’ and they ‘ministered unto Him of their substance’ (Luke viii.3). Doubtless they would ply, at every halting place, and all along the route, their busy ministering fingers to provide for the seemly accommodation of our Lord; and such refreshment as He required.” (The evangelists’ comments give us a rare glimpse into how Jesus’ ministry was supported. It is interesting that many of the very same women who enabled Christ’s ministry to function effectively were given the privilege of observing the climax of the Savior’s redemptive work—the very reason He came into the world). The gospel writers want us to know that it was love and fidelity that kept these women following and serving the Redeemer to the cross, the burial and the empty tomb. When these women could no longer minister to Jesus with their hands they continued to love Him with their teary eyes. Oh, that all of us would have such love and dedication to our Savior! Is your life a life of ministering to the Mediator or a life of selfishness and worldliness? “Let us with an eye...”

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Chapter 24: Christ’s Side Pierced

The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs: But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe. For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, “A bone of him shall not be broken.” And again another scripture saith, “They shall look on him whom they pierced.” (John 19:31-37)

Introduction

The account of what occurs after the death of Christ, before he was removed from the gibbet and given to Joseph of Arimathaea is peculiar to John. The beloved disciple’s record completely ignores the phenomena and reaction to our Lord’s death and instead focuses our attention on the Jews’ desire to be rid of the three crucified men at Calvary and the discovery that Jesus was already dead. By recording things omitted by the other evangelists, things he saw with his own eyes, John gives us precious information: the soldiers found the Savior already dead; none of the Savior’s bones were broken; and, one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear out of which came blood and water. “John describes here a series of Providential facts, omitted by his predecessors, which occurred in quick succession, and which united in impressing on the person of Jesus, in His condition of deepest humiliation, the Messianic seal.”784 As we study John’s narrative of these events we will consider: (1) the historical circumstances of the soldier’s actions; (2) the main point of the narrative—Jesus is found dead and proved to be dead; (3) John’s parenthetic comment as an eyewitness; and (4) the apostle’s application of prophecy to these events.

The Historical Circumstances

This scene at Calvary is set up by the Jewish leadership’s concerns about ceremonial pollution and the Sabbath day. Because it was the day of preparation (lit. “the preparation”785) the Jewish leadership wanted the Romans to take action so that the bodies of Jesus and the criminals could be removed and disposed of before the Sabbath began at sunset on Friday...
(sometime around 6:00 pm). This was a special concern because not only was the Sabbath approaching, but this Sabbath was a “high day.” This was the Sabbath of Passover week, and thus it was regarded as “very great,” as extra special in the eyes of the Jews. This concern was rooted in Deuteronomy 21:23: “his body [i.e. the corpse of a person executed] shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed by God.” If the bodies were not removed the land would be defiled and all the pilgrims who entered the city by walking on the road by Calvary would see that Deuteronomy 21:23 had been disregarded. Therefore, both ceremonial pollution and the reputation of the Sanhedrin were at stake.

Interestingly, once again we see the scrupulousness of the Jewish leaders with regard to the minute details of the law relating to ceremonies and ritual, while the moral laws relating to the just treatment of men are completely disregarded. The consciences of the Sanhedrinists were not pricked at all by the illegal arrest of Jesus, His unjust trial with false witnesses, or the Redeemer’s brutal torture and murder. Their great fear was that the land would be ceremonially polluted by allowing dead men to hang overnight. They were “blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel” (Mt. 23:24); who “neglected the weightier matters of the law” (Mt. 23:23). Their behavior is proof that unregenerate, wicked men may be very careful in the external performance of religious duties. How ethically perverted that they cared for the treatment of the dead but not for the living—what hypocrites!

As a result of this concern, certain representatives of the Sanhedrin went to Pilate to officially request that the legs of those crucified would be broken to hasten death. The Roman practice at that time was to let men die a very slow, lingering death (sometimes taking days) and then leave their bodies on the cross to rot and be devoured by birds. This cruel and grotesque custom served as a warning to all criminals and insurrectionists. In the Jewish areas, however, the Romans did allow the Jews to remove victims before sundown for burial (see Josephus, B.J. iv.v.2). Even, in other parts of the empire on special occasions such as the emperor’s birthday, bodies would be taken down and “handed over to the relatives of the condemned for burial.”

Given the fact that Pilate had already condemned an innocent man to death for the Jews and that Jerusalem, at that time, was crowded with Passover pilgrims, the governor was immediately willing to grant their request.

The method used for hastening death was called by the Romans the crurifragium. It involved using a heavy iron mallet to crush the legs of the victim. The word used (Greek, skelokopia) rendered “break” in most translations “means literally, ‘shiver to pieces.’”(It is of interest that the bones of a man crucified in this period, discovered in the area north of Jerusalem, had been broken; one leg was simply fractured, the other was smashed to pieces…).” Thus, what the Jews requested and Pilate granted was akin to a crushing mutilation of the legs. This would hasten death in at least two ways. First, the use of the legs to push the body up to catch a full breath of air would come to an end. Without the ability to breathe

786 In England, until the early nineteenth century, the bodies of criminals condemned to death were left hanging by chains on walls or places of execution to rot and be consumed by animals. In Scotland, the heads and hands of prominent Covenanter martyrs (1680-1688) were affixed near city gates for all the citizens to observe.
788 J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:368.
properly the body would be starved for oxygen and the brain would soon cease to function. Second, the pulverizing of the bones in the legs would cause severe blood loss and shock.

What is particularly interesting regarding the Jewish leadership’s request is that it demonstrates that the signs which accompanied the death of Christ had no effect upon them at all. It is safe to assume that the representatives did not approach Pilate during the three hours of darkness. Further, the Sanhedrinists who made the request of the governor were obviously unaware that Jesus was already dead. Therefore, it is likely that the leaders did not stay for the whole crucifixion, but at some time had departed. The fact that the Savior was already dead when the soldier approached Him indicates that, in spite of the darkness, the torn veil, the great earthquake, the rending of rocky cliffs and the opening of the tombs, the Sanhedrin went about their business as if nothing unusual had happened at all. They assumed the Nazarene was still alive and, even after the amazing signs, were determined to increase His pain and expedite His death. Their opposition and hatred of our Lord was still strong; as far as they were concerned, the more pain and shame they could bring upon Him the better. God’s power blocked the sun and split the rocky cliffs, but His Holy Spirit did not split their rocky hearts and turn them into hearts of flesh.

Another noteworthy point is how God used the wicked Jewish leaders to fulfill His sovereign purpose. The Jews’ desire to be rid of Christ before the Sabbath resulted in our Lord’s burial on Friday, the day He died. If our Lord had not been buried until Sunday or Monday then His famous promise, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:19), could not have been fulfilled. “How true it is that the wickedest enemies of God are only axes and saws and hammers in His hands, and are ignorantly His instruments for doing His work in the world. The restless, busy meddles of Caiaphas and his companions was actually one of the causes that Christ rose the third day after death, and His Messiahship was proved. Pilate was their tool; but they were God’s tools!”

Jesus in Found Dead and Proven to Be Dead

After Pilate had granted the Jews request, a soldier was immediately dispatched on horseback or by foot (Golgotha was right outside the city) to notify the centurion of Pilate’s orders to expedite the deaths of Jesus and the criminals by crushing their legs. After receiving their orders the soldiers began with the criminals on each side of Jesus. The hammer blows to

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790 Alfred Edersheim asserts that the breaking of the bones was not for the purpose of hastening death, but rather was “a sort of increase of punishment, by way of compensation for its shortening by the final stroke that followed” (The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 613. He cites, Friedlieb, Archaeol. D. Leidensgesch, pp. 163-168; but especially Nebe, u.s.i. pp. 394, 395). In this scenario the soldier would come and pulverize the bones of the legs for the purpose of causing excruciating pain. Then, immediately after hammering the legs, he would use a sword or spear to deliver the death blow (the coup de grace). While this scenario is possible, there is no mention of the use of a spear in connection with the criminals crucified with Jesus. Further, the spear is used on Christ not to deliver a death blow, but to make sure He was already dead (Jn. 19:32-34).


792 George Hutcheson, John, 406.

793 This interesting detail raises the question: Why did the soldiers approach the Savior last? Some scholars have suggested that perhaps they already knew that Christ was dead. This view is disproved by the simple fact that verse
the legs of these men, no doubt, would have resulted in hideous, blood-curdling screams on the part of these men. We must not forget that the very purpose of crucifixion was cruelty and agony. The soldiers could have dispatched these men with far less pain and horror by means of a sword or spear thrust. But, the Romans wanted their victims to feel themselves die. Note, “The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel” (Prov. 12:10).

It is noteworthy that the criminal who converted to Christ still had to go through terrible suffering before he entered paradise. The fact that Jesus forgave his sins and that he was justified before God did not eliminate the civil sentence against him or alleviate the severe bodily pain associated with that sentence. From the penitent criminal’s experience, we should learn two things. First, forgiveness from the Redeemer does not eliminate a person’s responsibility to make restitution, even if that restitution involves the death penalty. When many prominent evangelical leaders recently attempted to have the death penalty overturned of a notorious murderer in Texas who had converted to Christ, they were violating Scripture. Anyone that commits first or second degree murder (regardless of repentance at a later point) must be put to death (Gen. 9:5, 6; Ex. 21:12-14; 23-25; Num. 35:31). Second, when the Savior redeems a believer, He does not deliver him from the pain and suffering commonly associated with the process of dying. A great many notable saints have died horrible deaths as a result of persecution, disease, and the infirmities of old age. Our bodies will be delivered and glorified only at the final resurrection when Christ comes again. If we go through such pain, we must remember that the “extremity of dying agonies is no obstruction to the living comforts that wait for holy souls on the other side of death.”

After the soldiers finished breaking the legs of the criminals, they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead. Consequently, they did not need to break His legs (v. 33). One soldier, however, decided to thrust a spear deeply into the Savior’s side to make sure that He was dead. As a result of this deep wound, blood and water flowed out our Lord’s side (v. 34). These two verses present three distinct proofs that the Redeemer truly died on Calvary. Each proof is stronger and more irrefutable than the one which precedes it.

The first proof is the trained eye of the soldiers who examined Jesus. These men were professional executioners. It was their job to know when a victim of their work was dead. They examined the Mediator from only a few feet away and could see that He was not breathing or moving at all. He was dead. The second proof is the soldier’s spear thrust deep into the Savior’s side. Since the purpose of the spear thrust was to make sure that our Lord was dead, one can safely assume that the wound inflicted was intended to be a fatal wound. The soldier, who was an expert at dispatching criminals, thrust the spear directly into Christ’s heart. The third proof is the blood and water that flowed out of this wound. The phrase “blood and water” is significant

33 says that they discovered He was dead when they approached Him to breaks His legs. Others have argued that perhaps the criminals’ crosses were set forward, in front of our Lord’s cross. Therefore, the soldiers approached them first. The problem with this view is that even if it was true, a difference of walking a few feet more is not a good explanation of why the Nazarene was approached last. The most logical explanation is that after being terrified by the miracles that attended the Redeemer’s death and proclaiming Him to be the Son of God, the last thing they wanted to do was smash His legs. They dreaded the thought of having to inflict excruciating pain on the One they now regarded as divine.

794 “Scott remarks that those who broke the legs of the penitent thief, and hastened his end, were unconscious instruments of fulfilling our Lord’s promise, “Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise”’” (J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:368).

795 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1202.
because it indicates that the Redeemer’s heart had already stopped, allowing the red blood cells to descend under gravity.\textsuperscript{796}

These irrefutable evidences of our Lord’s death are necessary and important because: a) A real death is required for Jesus to be a propitiatory sacrifice unto God. b) Proof of the Mediator’s death is necessary in order to prove His resurrection from the dead. Unbelievers, skeptics and heretics throughout history have denied Christ’s death on the cross in order to reject His bodily resurrection on the third day. Modernists have developed the idea that Jesus did not really die, but had only passed out (the swoon theory). Then, when He was placed in the cool tomb He revived and recovered enough to escape and show Himself to His disciples. The nature of the crucifixion, the spear thrust, the water and blood, the stone weighing over a ton on the door of the tomb, and the armed Roman soldiers guarding the sepulcher renders all such naturalistic explanations of the resurrection as absurd and impossible. c) The spear thrust and the blood and water refutes all the heretical ideas that plagued the early church that Jesus did not have a genuine human body but was only a spirit being or phantasm.\textsuperscript{797}

\section*{Excursus on the Flow of Blood and Water}

Throughout the history of the church there has been a very wide range of opinion regarding the meaning and purpose of the phrase “blood and water.” There are many who agree with the present author that John is simply presenting a case to his readers that Jesus, according to His human nature, really died. Therefore, the blood and water is not to be interpreted as a miracle with mystical or allegorical meanings. Many others, however, see deep symbolic meaning behind these words. Some of the most common views are as follows.

(1) A common view in the ancient church, which is still very popular with sacramentals, is that the idea that the blood and water symbolize the two sacraments: the Lord’s supper and baptism. There are a number of problems with this view. First, there is nothing in the immediate or broader context that suggests John is making a symbolic or allegorical connection to the sacraments. Thus, this interpretation is arbitrary and speculative. Second, “the term ‘blood’ is never \textit{by itself} used in the NT as a designation of the Lord’s Supper.”\textsuperscript{798} Third, this interpretation is largely founded upon an erroneous sacramentalist

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item \textsuperscript{796} "The flow of ‘blood and water’ has been variously explained. Ordinarily dead bodies do not bleed because there is no action of the heart to produce arterial pressure. One suggestion is that since the body was erect, the flow was due to gravity and that the \textit{crassamentum} (the heavy, red corpuscles) and the serum (the yellowish-white aqueous part) of the blood had already begun to separate. Another is that either the stomach or the lungs [or the cavity around the heart] contained water that flowed with the blood” (Merrill C. Tenney, \textit{The Expositor’s Bible Commentary}, 9:185). The apostle does not say whether a large amount of liquid or only a little flowed out of Jesus’ side. While many commentators see a miracle in this outflow, there is no textual or medical reason to regard it as supernatural. If John’s sole purpose was to prove that our Lord was a real man who truly died, a miracle is unnecessary. Further, if it was meant to be a miraculous sign then it was an obscure sign, which is unlikely.
\item \textsuperscript{797} "One of the earliest extant comments on John 19:34, is that of Irenaeus, who takes this view of the evangelist’s purpose. To show the true humanity of Christ, Irenaeus calls attention to His being hungry at the Temptation, to His being tired (Jn. 4:6), to His tears (Jn. 11:35), to His bloody sweat (Lk. 22:44), and lastly to the piercing of His side, when blood and water flowed forth…. (c.Haer.iii.xxi.2; cf. iv.xxxiii.2). It will be observed that Irenaeus has no thought of a miracle here, nor does he proceed to find any mystical meaning in the incident” (J. H. Bernard, \textit{A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John}, 2:647-648).
\item \textsuperscript{798} George R. Beasley-Murray, \textit{John}, 357. Murray references A. E. Brooks who writes, “‘\textit{aima} [blood] is never found in the New Testament as a designation of the Eucharist” (\textit{A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles} [Edinburgh: T&T Clark (1912) 1980], 132). Brook goes on to point out that 1 John 5:6, “This is
concept of baptism and communion. Once the sacraments are biblically understood, the presuppositions behind this allegorical interpretation fall to the ground. Fourth, the use of water as a metaphor in John’s gospel points directly to the regenerating, sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, not to the water of baptism (cf. Jn. 3:5; 4:11-14; 7:38). The sacrament view derives its support more from its antiquity than from biblical principles of interpretation.

(2) Augustine viewed the wound in Jesus’ side as symbolic of a door of salvation. He compared it to the door in the side of Noah’s ark where eight persons and the animals entered to be saved from the flood. Similarly, George Hutcheson says, “his side was pierced and a passage opened to his heart, so by his suffering we may look into his heart wounded with love for us, and pouring out itself for us; and that as a hole was made in Adam’s side to take out a wife, so a hole was made in his side to take in his beloved bride to his heart.” While this view may have poetic, devotional or contemplative merit, it is not what John had in mind when he recorded these verses.

(3) Another view is that the flow of blood and water is a symbolic fulfillment of Zechariah 13:1: “In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.” J. C. Ryle writes, “The moment He was dead this fountain was opened and began to flow. Over the bleeding side of our Lord there might have been written, ‘Behold the fountain for all sin.’ It is no small evidence to mind, in favour of this view, that this famous prophecy occurs only five verses after the text immediately quoted by St. John in this very chapter, ‘They shall look on Him whom they pierced’ (Zech. ii.10).” While there is no question that the “fountain” refers to the cleansing power of Jesus’ blood to forgive sin, there are no solid exegetical reasons to connect the flow of blood and water to a fountain. The word “fountain” indicates the continuing, inexhaustible abundance of grace that flows to God’s people through the merits of Christ.

(4) A common view is that the “blood and water” “signified the two great benefits which all believers partake of through Christ—justification and sanctification; blood for remission, water for regeneration; blood for atonement, water for purification…. To Christ crucified we owe both merit for our justification, and Spirit and grace for our sanctification.” While there is no way to know if this thought was in John’s mind as he wrote these words; nevertheless, this view is certainly an excellent application from what John observed. The Savior’s sacrificial death eliminates the guilt and penalty of sin and the Holy Spirit applies the Mediator’s work to our hearts in regeneration and sanctification. The Redeemer saves us both from the guilt and power of sin. “That ‘blood’ was the symbol of atonement, and ‘water’ of cleansing, every careful reader of the Old Testament must know. The two things are brought together by St. Paul in Heb. ix.19.”

He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood,” refers “to definite historical facts in the life of Christ on earth which could be regarded as peculiarly characteristic of the Mission which He ‘came’ to fulfill” (Ibid).

799 George Hutcheson, John, 406.
801 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1203.
John’s Parenthetical Comment as an Eyewitness

After John describes the events in verses 33 and 34 (i.e. Jesus is found dead and the spear is thrust into His side, followed by the issue of blood and water), he does something very unusual and remarkable. He stops the historical narrative for a moment to address his readers personally, assuring them that his testimony as an eyewitness is completely true and reliable. He writes, “And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe” (19:35). Although, some commentators do not think this witness is John himself, we are confident that it is for the following reasons.

First, John was indeed an eyewitness at the cross and was just mentioned in verse 26. He was the only eyewitness from among the twelve at Golgotha. Second, this verse perfectly reflects John’s style as a writer who likes to appeal to himself as an eyewitness. Note for example John 21:24, “This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true” (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1). None of the other gospel writers stops to personally address the reader. Third, the personal assurance that he knows this eyewitness is telling the truth clearly points to himself as the eyewitness. In other words, he knows the testimony is true because he saw the events with his own eyes. He appeals to his own consciousness that knows absolutely that he is indeed stating the truth. Fourth, “The use of the perfect participle rather than the aorist is evidence that the writer himself is the person who saw. If he were appealing to the witness of another person he would almost certainly have written, as the A.V. [KJV], ‘he that saw.’”

What the beloved disciple saw was burned into his soul and to him these events were always still before his mind. If we remove the third person and paraphrase John’s statement it becomes easier to understand. He in essence says, “I have testified to the things that I have personally seen and still remember vividly in my mind. Therefore, my testimony is truthful, genuine and perfect. And I know that I am telling you the truth.” John presents himself as an eyewitness who has accurately recorded what occurred and knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that his testimony is both sufficient and true. As a Spirit-inspired apostle, John was incapable of making a mistake in his account.

After John makes this emphatic, passionate statement regarding the reliability of his record he gives the reason why he made his interjection: “that ye also may believe.” The apostle uses the present subjunctive (ina pisteuete, “may keep on believing”) which indicates that his appeal goes beyond merely entering the faith. John is concerned that a strong faith in Christ continues in the Christian community. This interjection indicates a pastoral concern on the part

805 “We know that John never mentions himself or any member of his family or wider relationship by name. He always uses the third person and even this only when literally compelled to do so” (R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel, 1317).
806 Many commentators believe the last statement, “he knows that he is telling the truth” (v. 35), does not refer to the beloved disciple but to God (e.g., Moffatt’s paraphrase says, “He who saw it has borne witness (his witness is true; God knows he is telling the truth”). The Greek can be interpreted in both ways. Those who favor the view that God knows he is telling the truth argue that, as a Jew, John would appeal to a secondary witness, not to himself. This argument is refuted by the simple fact that John is writing an account as one of four evangelists. He knows that the synoptic gospels have already given their testimony of God’s amazing miracles, the centurion’s confession as well as the group of female observers. Therefore, he does not need to appeal to God as a second witness. The other evangelists already have. “Jn. assures his readers that the aged apostle knows exactly what he is saying: eketinos oiden” (J. H. Bernard, The Gospel According to St. John, 2:65).
of John as he wrote his gospel. There were many heretics in John’s day that were attempting to seduce believers away from a true orthodox trust in Christ. The apostle focuses on the trustworthiness of this incident because it demonstrated: “(1) the reality of Christ’s humanity against Docetic views…; (2) the reality of Christ’s Divinity, against Ebionite views; while His human form was no mere phantom, but flesh and blood, yet He was not therefore a mere man, but the Son of God; (3) the reality of Christ’s death, and therefore of His resurrection, against Jewish insinuations of trickery (comp. Matt. xxviii.13-15); (4) the clear and unexpected fulfillment of two Messianic prophecies.”

From this blessed interjection by John we ought to learn a number of important truths. First, the inspired historical testimony on which we rely for our salvation is one hundred percent accurate and therefore stands as a sure foundation as the object of our faith. As Peter says, “For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16). Atheists, modernists, higher critics and all skeptics attack this solid foundation of truth because they do not want to submit to Jesus Christ as the supreme Lord over everything in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18ff.). But, if the Bible and the gospels were partly true and partly false, how would the Christian know what is true and what is man-made mythology? Under such circumstances biblical faith would be replaced by an arbitrary, relativistic (blind leap into the dark) kind of trust. It would be the end of biblical Christianity and the beginning of secular humanistic tyranny. But, thank God, He has assured us that “every word of the LORD is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him” (Prov. 30:5; cf. Ps. 119:140).

Second, we see the importance of learning all the various details of the person and work of Christ as a bulwark against heresy. The beloved disciple assumes that a hearty trust in all the truths he is presenting is the key to abiding in the truth of the gospel. A strong and steady faith cannot walk on slippery and unsure ground. Believers must fasten themselves to all these truths so that when the waves of heresy, skepticism and doubt come upon them, they are unmovable. People who do not study these great historical events, contemplate them, cherish them and place them in their hearts are easy prey for the philosophical and theological wolves of this world. These gospel truths are our armor. A man who goes into battle without his armor will be butchered and slain by the adversary.

Third, we must continually be trusting in the historical fact that Christ truly died for our sins. The glorious gospel is not some philosophical axiom to which we give a quick nod and then move on. It is a truth that is to remain the centerpiece of our faith and practice. The fact that Jesus died in our place as a satisfaction for sin and that by virtue of His death sin is subdued in our everyday Christian lives must remain the focal point of our theology and worldview. People who view the cross as something that we must quickly go beyond to focus on politics, social action, “Christian Reconstruction,” eschatological theorizing and so forth are in grave danger of losing the biblical emphasis of Scripture and losing the purity and power of the gospel.

The Types and Prophecy Fulfilled

After describing the events he has witnessed, John says that they are literal fulfillments of certain Old Testament types and prophecies. “Belief is supported by Scripture; for the two surprising events, Christ’s escaping the crurifragium and yet having His side pierced, were

evidently preordained in the Divine counsels.”

“This correspondence between prophecy and fulfillment is itself a strong motive to faith.”

John is pointing out that his eyewitness testimony is supported by the testimony of the sacred Scriptures. Therefore, these details that seem unimportant to the uninformed are in reality very important. They demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Before we examine the typology and prophecy that John had in mind we need to consider from a strictly human perspective how unlikely these predictions were to be fulfilled. The governor Pilate had given specific orders for these men to break the legs of Jesus and the two criminals. Normally soldiers (especially Roman ones) carry out their orders. But these soldiers not only found that the Nazarene was already dead, but had been so impressed by the manner in which our Lord died and the miracles which attended His death, that they did not want to mutilate the Son of God’s legs. Perhaps the centurion himself stayed their hand. Also, the soldiers had no command to pierce Christ’s side. When they came upon Him, He had obviously already died. There was no need to pierce His side. Yet, one of the soldiers decided to do so, just to make sure. “How can brutal men be kept from one act of violence, for which they had specific commandment, and be led to enact another for which they had no commandment? There is only one answer. By overruling circumstances, the God who inspired the prophecies made sure that they were fulfilled.”

It is amazing how God so easily and perfectly carries out His will no matter what the circumstances and without in the least violating man’s choice as a secondary agent. The way in which these prophecies were fulfilled teaches us that no matter how unlikely (from a human standpoint) it looks as though a promise or prophecy from God is to be fulfilled, we can still firmly believe it without doubting or wavering. When you find yourself tempted to doubt any promise or prophecy from God, think of these kinds of fulfillments and trust all of God’s Word firmly. “Let God be true and every man a liar. Though men or devils should give God the lie, hold on to what God has spoken; for heaven and earth shall pass away, but not one jot or tittle of his word shall fall to the ground.”

The first fulfillment of Scripture is an allusion to two passages which deal with the proper treatment of the paschal lamb. Exodus 12:46 reads, “In one house it shall be eaten; you shall not carry any of the flesh outside the house, nor shall you break one of its bones.” Likewise Numbers 9:12 says, “They shall leave none of it until morning, nor break one of its bones.” The paschal lamb served as a special type of Christ. It was not to be treated like an ordinary animal for food. It was dedicated to God and protected by the law from the breaking of its bones and other common uses. It was God’s special lamb set apart for the purpose of delivering Israel’s first born

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811 Charles H. Spurgeon, “On the Cross after Death,” 33:197. On God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility Spurgeon writes, “There was no compulsion put upon them; they did this of their own proper thought. No angel came from heaven to stand with his broad wings in the front of the cross, so as to protect the Saviour; no awful aegis of mystery was hung over the sacred body of the Lord so that intruders might be driven back with fear. No, the quaternion of soldiers did whatever they wished to do. They acted of their own free will, and yet at the same time they fulfilled the eternal counsel of God. Shall we never be able to drive into men’s minds the truth that predestination and free agency are both facts? Men sin as freely as birds fly in the air, and they are altogether responsible for their sin; and yet everything is ordained and foreseen of God. The fore-ordination of God in no degree interferes with the responsibility of man. I have often been asked by persons to reconcile the two truths. My only reply is—They need no reconciliation, for they never fell out. Why should I try to reconcile two friends? Prove to me that the two truths do not agree” (Ibid, 33:198-199).
from the angel of death and the covenant people from bondage unto Egypt. The Passover which led to redemption from Egypt typified the ultimate and final redemption achieved by the Messiah. John sees in the manner of Jesus’ death and the treatment of His sacrificed dead body proof that He was the true Pascal Lamb. “For fifteen hundred years Israel had punctiliously observed this item in the passover observance, and none of them (so far as we know) had any idea of its meaning. Now the Holy Spirit explains it.”

In order for Jesus to be a true sacrifice for sin, God allowed His Son to be bound, spit upon, scourged, mocked, ridiculed, crucified and abandoned. But once the price for sin had been paid in full and Christ died, God would not allow His body to be abused or mutilated. “The Lord’s right to him is declared by the reservation which is made concerning his bones. Do you not see here how he is identified as being ‘the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world’? It is a mark of identity upon which faith fixes her eyes.” Paul agrees with John that “Christ our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Cor. 5:7). If you want the curse of the law and the avenging angel to pass over you, then you must be cleansed by the blood of Christ. “Sin breaks our bones, as it broke David’s (Ps. li.8); but it did not break Christ’s bones; he stood firm under the burden, mighty to save.”

Another passage which may have been on John’s mind is Psalm 34:20, which describes God’s loving care for the righteous one who suffers. The psalmist says, “He guards all his bones; not one of them is broken.” Although this Psalm refers to God’s special protection of living godly men from the violence of the wicked, the Spirit may be applying it to Jesus who is the one true righteous man, because of God’s special care for Him in death. This care will extend to our Lord’s place of burial and to His resurrection. “Just as Christ in His burial is spared every manifestation of shame which would have no significance for the Suretyship, and just as He therefore, is not cast among the bandits in a general grave, but in ‘a grave’ as the Son of man, so no other form of affliction is placed upon Him here save that which God regards as absolutely necessary for Him. The dying has been enough. According to His body, also, Jesus walked under the protection of special providence.”

The third fulfillment of Scripture is from Zechariah 12:10: “And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look upon Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.” This is a prophecy that clearly has multiple fulfillments. Here John applies it to those who actually were present at the crucifixion and saw the soldier pierce Jesus’ side. It can apply to the soldiers who were in charge of the execution and/or the Jews who were responsible for the crucifixion. Obviously, Zechariah applies it to the Jews. Luke informs us that the large Jewish crowds responded to what they had seen at Calvary by smiting their breasts (23:48), an act of mourning and self-reproach.

The context of the Zechariah passage indicates its fulfillment also on the day of Pentecost when God poured out the Holy Spirit on the church and a great many inhabitants of Jerusalem looked upon the One they pierced with the eyes of faith and the mourning of repentance. The
beloved disciple will later apply this same passage to the coming of Christ in which the mourning, once again, is not one of repentance but of remorse unto despair and death (Rev. 1:7).

Chapter 25: Christ Buried

And now when the even was come, because it was the preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathaea, an honourable counsellor, which also waited for the kingdom of God, came, and went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus. And Pilate marvelled if he were already dead: and calling unto him the centurion, he asked him whether he had been any while dead. And when he knew it of the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph. And he bought fine linen, and took him down, and wrapped him in the linen, and laid him in a sepulchre which was hewn out of a rock, and rolled a stone unto the door of the sepulchre. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses beheld where he was laid. (Mk. 15:42-47)

When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple: He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered. And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed. And there was Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre. (Mt. 27:57-61)

And, behold, there was a man named Joseph, a counsellor; and he was a good man, and a just: (The same had not consented to the counsel and deed of them;) he was of Arimathaea, a city of the Jews: who also himself waited for the kingdom of God. This man went unto Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. And he took it down, and wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a sepulchre that was hewn in stone, wherein never man before was laid. And that day was the preparation, and the sabbath drew on. And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment. (Lk. 23:50-56)

And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand. (Jn. 19:38-42)

Introduction

The last event of Christ’s humiliation recorded in the gospels is the burial of Jesus. As the death and the events surrounding it are amazing and important, the story of the burial of Christ is also marvelous. The sovereign hand of God is clearly seen in these events. While it looked as though the body of the Savior would be tossed into a pit or shallow grave with the two criminals, God had other plans. He providentially took care of His Son’s dead body. “Come and see a
burial that conquered the grave, and buried it, a burial that beautified the grave and softened it for all believers."\(^{817}\)

The burial of Jesus and the details surrounding it are recorded by all four evangelists. They describe the most important burial that ever took place in the history of mankind. While all men die and most are buried only Christ was buried as a substitute. Only the Redeemer entered the earth as the second Adam to become the first fruits of them that slept.

**Joseph of Arimathea**

The gospels all begin by introducing us to Joseph of Arimathea who is the main character in these events.\(^{818}\) He is not mentioned prior to this point and thus the gospel writers give us a number of important details regarding who he was. Interestingly, each gospel author gives details not found among the other three writers.

All the gospels say that Joseph was from Arimathea (Mt. 27:57; Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:51; Jn. 19:38). Luke identifies this town as “a city of the Jews” (23:51). This would place Arimathea in Judea rather than the region of Galilee which is identified as “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Mt. 4:15; cf. Jn. 4:47, 54). “The town of Arimathea has been identified with Ramathaim-zophim (1 Sam. 1:1), Rathamin (1 Macc. 11:34), and Ramathain (Joshus, Ant. 13.4.9…127), all of which are considered variant names for the same place (Fitmyer, *Luke* 2:1526). If this city has been rightly recognized, it is about twenty miles northwest of Jerusalem.\(^{819}\)

Matthew, writing to a predominantly Jewish audience, identifies Joseph of Arimathea as a rich man (27:53), knowing that Jews would make the obvious connection to Isaiah 53:9. Isaiah had prophesied that the enemies of the Messiah had assigned the Redeemer a grave with the wicked. But instead of a disgraceful burial, the suffering Servant would have an honorable burial with the rich. If Joseph of Arimathea had not acted decisively in this matter, the Romans would have either buried Jesus in a shallow grave with the criminals or discarded His body in Gehenna, the local garbage dump. Joseph’s tomb fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy.

Mark and Luke tell us that Joseph was a member of the council or the Sanhedrin, as was Nicodemus (Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:50). Thus, he had a significant social standing in Jerusalem. This explains why Pilate was so willing to listen to him and cooperate with his request. Mark says that Joseph was an “honorable counselor” (15:43). The word “honorable” (*euschemon*) means prominent, reputable, of high standing. Joseph was a prominent member of the great Sanhedrin. He was a distinguished, highly respected member of the council whose word carried great weight among the members. This implies that he had served in the Sanhedrin many years and was a heavyweight in knowledge, wisdom and justice.

Luke identifies him as “a good and just man” who had not consented to the decision and actions of the Sanhedrin regarding the arrest, trial and conviction of Jesus (23:50-51). Joseph was an honest, wise, godly Jew who refused to cooperate with the corrupt, apostate and unjust decisions of the Jewish leadership. Given the fact that the decision of the council against Christ

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\(^{817}\) Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1204.

\(^{818}\) “[T]he very name JOSEPH reminds us of a type. Joseph was the name of him who supported the patriarch Jacob his father, when living, and magnificently buried him when dead [Gen. 50]. A Joseph also had the charge of watching over Jesus in infancy, and of training him up in the days of youth. Now another Joseph is entrusted with the care of his burial when dead” (Herman Witsius, *The Apostles’ Creed*, 2:119-120).

\(^{819}\) Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 518. “In any case, Joseph was now settled at Jerusalem with his family, since he possessed here a burial place, but only recently, because the sepulcher had not been used” (Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, 957).
was unanimous, we can surmise that either Joseph refused to attend these proceedings or given his fair and just manner he was purposefully kept in the dark about the arrest and trial until the desired verdict was achieved. Given the fact that Joseph was a secret disciple for fear of the Jews (Jn. 19:38), his non-attendance at the trial makes perfect sense. If he attended the trial he would have been in a situation that would force him to take a stand for Christ or publicly deny Him.

Mark and Luke say that Joseph of Arimathea “waited for the kingdom of God” (Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:51). This identification indicates that Joseph was a godly man, like Simeon (“Simeon…was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel.” [Lk. 2:25]), and likely had been listening to the teaching of John the Baptist (Mt. 3:2) and Jesus. “Every pious Jew would pray regularly in the synagogue for the coming of God’s kingdom.” In any case, his theology or eschatological expectations were in harmony with Christ’s own teachings (cf. Mt. 11:4-6, 12).

Matthew and John identify Joseph of Arimathea as “a disciple of Jesus” (Jn. 19:38; Mt. 27:57). Matthew’s account literally reads “who also himself was discipled to Jesus.” “He had recognized in Jesus elements that lifted Him above all other rabbis and teachers.” Joseph believed in our Lord’s teachings and probably gathered around Him in Jerusalem to listen to Him when He could. But John says that he kept his views secret because he feared the Jews (19:38). Joseph, prior to his coming to Pilate, had purposely lived his life in such a way as to avoid being known as a disciple of Christ.

Joseph’s Fear of the Jews

In order to understand how remarkable and commendable it was that Joseph of Arimathea asked for and buried Christ, we must examine the fear that kept him from publicly confessing the Savior. This fear was rooted in a number of things.

First, Joseph of Arimathea knew that if he had publicly taken a stand for the Redeemer he would have been excommunicated. We know this from other portions of the gospels. John says that the parents of the healed man who was born blind “feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was the Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue” (9:22). This fear kept a number of the rulers in line. “Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (Jn. 12:42-43; cf. 7:13).

The punishment of excommunication in the days of our Lord was a very heavy one. It meant exclusion from the synagogue and temple worship and also a ban on any fellowship or contact with other Jews. Although the death penalty at that time was not permitted under Roman law, a total separation from the covenant community would have meant complete social and economic isolation. Those who desired to follow Christ and confess Him before men had to come to terms with the dread of being cut off from Israel. For them it was equivalent to being cast out of the visible church, one’s own nation, one’s own culture and heritage.

Second, Joseph’s confession would have resulted in his being cast out of the Sanhedrin. His honor, prestige and livelihood would all be lost. Everything that he had worked for his whole life was at stake. Joseph of Arimathea had to decide whether he would take up his cross and follow Christ or whether he would be praised by men; whether he would be rich and popular or

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relatively poor and hated by his own friends, relatives and co-workers. Joseph had to count the cost of what it really meant to be a Christian.

What was true for Joseph of Arimathea is true for every one of us. The Bible makes it very clear that there really is no such thing as a secret Christian. Jesus said, “I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God. But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God” (Lk. 12:8-9; cf. Mt. 10:32; Mk. 8:38). Paul said, “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Our Lord told the disciples that they would be hated by all for His name’s sake (Mt. 10:39). Jesus also said, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Mt. 10:39). The person who does not take up a life of sacrifice, self-denial and even pain due to hardship and persecution in order to follow Jesus is not worthy of the name Christian (Mt. 10:38). The Savior put it very bluntly when He said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). It is one thing to know that Jesus is the Christ in an intellectual-historical sense and quite another to trust in the Mediator, looking to Him with saving faith. Saving faith does not display an indifference to public confession and godly living, but instead heartily embraces them. True faith is always accompanied by good works or evidences of faith (Jas. 2:14-20).

There are many in America today who view being a Christian as a secret or private matter. In our pluralistic culture it is even considered inappropriate to discuss religious matters like the sacrifice and Lordship of Christ. After all, we are told, we should not offend the religious sensibilities of others. But, such a view is certainly not condoned in Scripture. Joseph is presented as a man who realized that he had missed a great opportunity to be close to Christ and finally takes a stand after our Lord is dead.

The lesson here is that there are times when men must choose between the praise of God and the praise of men. In our anti-Christian culture believers are openly ridiculed, mocked and laughed at as fanatics and fools. Christians who are immature or new to the faith may be tempted at home, work or school to be secret disciples. But those who attempt to be incognito believers are not only violating the biblical imperatives relating to public confession and not placing one’s lamp under a basket (Mt. 5:15), but also are placing themselves in great temptation. Sanctification can only progress when professing Christians take the offensive against sin and the world. A person who is truly regenerate cannot remain a secret Christian for very long. “What you lose by unfaithful wrapping of your convictions in a napkin and burying them in the ground is the joyful use of the convictions, the deeper hold of the truth by which you live, and before which you bow, and the true fellowship with the Master whom you acknowledge and confess.”

The person who says he believes in Christ, yet continues to remain a secret Christian for a long period of time, simply has no reason to believe that his faith or profession is genuine. Such a person is more concerned about what the world thinks than what God thinks. His regard for the praise of men demonstrates that his love of Christ is not as important as the opinion of unbelievers. The person who really loves Jesus will take a stand for Him when the opportunity arises. If we really believe in Christ and understand the Scriptures, then we should not care what unbelievers think. Joseph of Arimathea had much more to lose than any of us, yet he seized the opportunity to demonstrate his love of the Savior.

Another lesson is that we need to examine ourselves and make sure that a love of money and material things does not cause us to be timid or deficient in the confession of our faith in word or deed. The professing Christian who acts worldly, dishonestly or in a compromising way to seal a business deal and make money is a spiritual coward. The person who says he is a disciple, but refuses to keep our Lord’s commandments is not a Christian. “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 Jn. 2:15-16). Are you ready to suffer, become poor and be forsaken by all if God calls upon you to do so in order to publicly take a stand for Christ? Those who do so will have great rewards in heaven.

Joseph Publicly Takes a Stand for Christ

We have seen that Joseph had a great deal to lose if he publicly committed himself to the Nazarene. Consequently, for a time, he was unwilling to confess the Savior before men. This refusal to come out of the closet cannot be defended biblically; but, during the course of time the Holy Spirit was doing a work upon his heart. Perhaps it was the unjust trial, the brutal treatment of Jesus and the crucifixion itself that God used to convict Joseph. Calvin attributes this radical change of behavior to the efficacy of our Lord’s death:

“They bring their spices to embalm the body of Christ; but they would never have done so, if they had not been perfumed with the sweet savour of his death. This shows the truth of what Christ had said, Unless a grain of corn die, it remaineth alone; but when it is dead, it bringeth forth much fruit, (John xii.24.) For here we have a striking proof that his death was more quickening than his life; and so great was the efficacy of that sweet savour which the death of Christ conveyed to the minds of those two men, that it quickly extinguished all the passions belonging to the flesh. So long as ambition and the love of money reigned in them, the grace of Christ had no charms for them; but now they begin to disrelish the whole world. 823

Although the fear of men caused Joseph not to render the devotion, honor and service to Christ that He deserved while He was alive, the Spirit of God overcame that fear, made Joseph a new man and caused him to assist the dead Redeemer with a love, dedication and service that is striking. The man who was once timid and afraid now serves Jesus with a boldness that is unsurpassed. There are a number of things that Joseph did to reveal his faith and devotion to Jesus.

First, he summoned the courage to go to Pilate to request the body of Christ (Mt. 27:58; Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:52; Jn. 19:38). Mark says that he “boldly went in unto Pilate” (15:43). Joseph probably first approached the centurion and told him that he would seek permission to assume responsibility for the body of the Redeemer. The centurion who had just proclaimed the Nazarene the Son of God was eager to cooperate with the desire to give the Mediator an honorable burial. As a member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph knew the Roman regulations regarding the disposal of the body of a man condemned to death and thus knew he had to go directly to the governor to get permission. 824

823 John Calvin, Commentary on the Gospel of John, 2:244.
824 “There is a well-documented Roman reluctance to release to their families and friends the bodies of traitors (see conveniently Brown, CBQ 50 [1988] 234-36): there was an understandable fear that such criminals might be imitated as martyr/heroes; the denial of a decent burial was considered likely to reduce the incidence of such
Joseph’s decision to go to Pilate was courageous because: (1) The Redeemer had been convicted of high treason by the Roman state. Because Joseph was not a relative of Jesus, it would be assumed that he was a supporter of the Lord’s teachings and movement. Joseph was opening up his life to investigation and possible arrest. Pilate, however, knowing that our Lord was innocent and probably feeling somewhat angry at the Jews for using him to kill a righteous Man, gave the body over to Joseph. (Mark notes that Pilate was so surprised that Christ was already deceased that he inquired of the centurion as to how long He had been dead [15:44].)

(2) By coming forward to ask for the body of Jesus, Joseph was publicly acknowledging that he was a friend and disciple of Christ. He knew that his acts of devotion toward the Savior would lead to the end of his political career and persecution by the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees. The threats and intimidation of the Jewish leadership had caused all the disciples to flee for their lives. Even John and the women who watched from afar off did not have the courage or procedural knowledge to step forward and claim our Lord’s body. When Joseph’s services were needed he made his attachment to Christ known. When God placed Joseph in a position to demonstrate his faithfulness to the Redeemer, he seized the opportunity. He now feared God in such a way that he no longer feared what men could do to him. Jesus became everything to him and the cares of this world wilted into nothing in his sight. “The conduct of Joseph deserves our praise and admiration, and his name will be held in honor by the Church of Christ, in consequence of it, as long as the world stands.”

Second, Joseph humbled himself in order to carry out his act of devotion to Jesus. Men who are rich, powerful members of the civil government are not known for their humility. But Joseph exposed himself to ritual uncleanness and the contempt of the people in order to honor our Lord’s body. When he went to Pilate to ask for Christ’s corpse, he became ritually unclean upon entering the governor’s residence. Then Joseph, perhaps with the help of the soldiers, took the Savior down from the cross. The cross was lowered and laid upon the blood-stained earth. The crown of thorns was carefully removed and the cruel iron spikes were drawn out. The touching of a dead body also made Joseph ceremonially unclean; the Jews would have been repulsed by Joseph’s actions. It was considered a very disgraceful thing “to receive from the hand of the executioner the body of a crucified man.” But Joseph did not care what the people thought, for his heart was saturated with love for Christ. A strong faith and devotion toward the Savior shuts off the arrogant, foolish, unbelieving murmurings of the wicked. “So does trial elicit faith, and the wind, which quenches the feeble flame that plays around the outside, fan into brightness the fire that burns deep within, though for a time unseen. Joseph of Arimathea, now no longer a secret disciple, but bold in the avowal of his reverent love, would show to the Dead body of His Master all veneration.”

Third, Joseph’s faith was now so strong that he honored Christ when He was dead; when from a human standpoint, it looked as though the Nazarene’s work was a failure. When Jesus

825 J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:381.
827 Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 2:616.
was alive and was working amazing signs and was preaching the most spiritual and profound of sermons, Joseph did not outwardly commit himself to the Redeemer. But now that He was dead, he publicly took action to serve Him. This proves that a strong faith trusts in God and does great things even when knowledge is incomplete. There is no evidence that anyone, including Joseph, was expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. But Joseph’s love and devotion overcame that which was lacking in his knowledge. Joseph’s faith in the person and teaching of Christ was not lessened by the reproach of the cross. He knew the Savior was who He claimed to be and would cling to Him in love no matter what the consequences to his own personal fame or fortune. His behavior sets a wonderful example to believers of every age.

Fourth, Joseph went to great personal expense to care for the body of Jesus. Joseph gave our Lord his own tomb that was hewn out of solid rock and had never been used (Mt. 27:60; Lk. 23:53; Jn. 19:41). “A tomb cut out of solid rock would have been particularly expensive. This tomb into which Joseph placed the body of Jesus was…, ‘his new tomb,’ one that he had recently prepared…. A new tomb would obviously have contained no other body, thereby obviating the possibility of a later confusion of bodies.”828 He also prepared by procuring a linen cloth (burial shroud) to wrap Christ’s body after he was taken down from the cross (Mk. 15:46). Matthew says that the cloth was “clean” (27:59) and uses a word (kathara) that could indicate that the material was not only clean but white.

John’s gospel indicates that Joseph had help from a friend who had also been a secret disciple. “And Nicodemus who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds” (19:39). This is the same Nicodemus of John 3 and 7:50. Clearly Joseph and Nicodemus had some sort of prior arrangement to take care of our Lord’s burial. Joseph would provide the tomb, which he already owned and was nearby, as well as the linen; Nicodemus would bring the costly spices used in wrapping the body. Nicodemus would not normally have had such a large quantity of spices on hand. Therefore, he probably went into the city and procured them while Joseph bought the grave clothes. The suffering and death of Christ had the same effect on both men. Both were publicly and courageously drawn to the Savior.

The amount of spices that Nicodemus brought to prepare the Redeemer’s body was staggering. “One hundred litrai is equivalent of 65.45 pounds.”829 Obviously, Nicodemus was enormously wealthy and wanted to demonstrate his love for Jesus by giving him a burial fit for a king. The spices that he purchased were so heavy that he either had to have them delivered to the site or brought them on a mule or a cart. The myrrh used for burial was in powdered form, which was very expensive. “It was made of the aromatic gum resin, exuding from the grey odorous bark of the Balsamo-dendron myrrha; it was also used extensively by the Egyptians for burial purposes. Mixed with Myrrh was aloe, the Hebrew ashalim, a powdered wood, most highly prized for the delicate odor which it releases when the wood decays.”830

Jesus Lovingly Prepared for Burial

Now that Joseph and Nicodemus had the materials they needed on site, they began to carefully prepare the body of Christ for burial. Normally the first thing to be done would be to wash the dead body with water. This would have been difficult and time-consuming in the case

828 Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14-18, 858-859.
829 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 359.
of our Lord who was covered in spittle, dried blood, sweat and dirt. Because they were in a hurry they would have had to bring some water, or perhaps they secured the Roman soldiers’ sour wine for this purpose. Although none of the gospels mention the washing of the body, it was such an “important part of the burial ritual (even permitted on the Sabbath, m. Sab. 23:5) that it is unlikely to have been omitted however great the hurry.”

After the body was washed, it would be carefully wrapped with cloth. “Among clothing that belongs to us, Christ put on even the grave-clothes, to make them easy to us, and to enable us to call them our wedding-clothes.” The synoptics indicate that a large square of cloth was used while John speaks of “linen cloths” or “wrappings.” This, of course, is not a contradiction for both descriptions are true. On the body itself and in between each layer of cloth a generous amount of myrrh and aloes would be sprinkled or poured over the body. Some of Jesus’ female followers from Galilee also “prepared spices and ointments” (Lk. 23:56) in order to “anoint” Christ (Mk. 16:1) the day after the Sabbath. Either these women were unaware of the amount of spices used by Joseph and Nicodemus or, more probably, the haste involved in preparing our Lord for burial due to the nearness of the Sabbath meant that the burial formalities were not completed to their satisfaction.

The Jewish process was very different than Egyptian methods which involved removing the bodily organs and fluids and then replacing them with an embalming mixture which would mummify the body. This process took many days. The Jews cleansed and covered the body with clean linens, spices and ointments in order to freshen it and stave off the smell of decay. A biblical worldview caused the Jews to show respect to their dead; thus, John notes that what Joseph and Nicodemus did was customary among the Jews. They did not mutilate the body like the Egyptians or burn the body like various pagan peoples:

The Jews, as Tacitus (Hist. 5.5) indicates, were averse to cremating the corpse, as was frequently the practice of the Greeks (cf. Sophocles, Electra 1136-1139; for inhumation, Thul 1, 134, 6; Plato Phedo 115E) and of the Romans who in Cicero’s day used both methods (De leg 2, 22, 56). The seeming exception in the burning of the bodies of Saul and his sons (1 Sam. 31:11-13) prob. was an emergency measure lest the Philistines molest the bodies, for the same men buried their bones. Early Bible legislation required that those guilty of sexual immorality (Lev. 20:14 [incest]; 21:9 [the daughter of a priest who becomes a prostitute]) and those under a curse as Achan and his family (Josh. 7:15, 25) were to be burned.

Until quite recently virtually all Christian denominations were opposed to cremation. Like the Old Covenant church, they viewed the dignified treatment of the dead body as consistent with the future resurrection of the body and considered burning (which is viewed as associated with judgment) as inconsistent. Matthew Henry’s application is noteworthy:

In conformity to this example, we ought to have regard to the dead bodies of Christians; not to enshrine and adore their relics, no, not those of the most eminent saints and martyrs (nothing like that was done to the dead body of Christ himself), but carefully to deposit them, the dust in the dust, as those who believe that the dead bodies of the saints are still united to Christ and designed for glory and immortality at the last day. The resurrection of the saints will be in virtue

832 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1205.
of Christ’s resurrection, and therefore in burying them we should have an eye to Christ’s burial, for he being dead, thus speaketh.”

The Savior Entombed

As the gospel writers describe the burial of Jesus, they give us a number of details that are significant. First, our Lord was placed not in His own grave, but in another man’s tomb. Therefore, the life of poverty that was part of His humiliation attended the Redeemer even unto His death and burial. When Christ came into the world He was born into a cradle which was not his own. When He ministered to the people he had nowhere of his own to lie down to sleep (Mt. 8:20). When He died, it was the generosity of a rich man that supplied Him with a sepulcher. Interestingly, “Twice was Jesus Christ rich in the days of His poverty. Once, immediately after His birth, when the wise men from the East offered Him gold, and frankincense, and myrrh; and now, after His ignominious death, when a rich man buries him, and a distinguished man provides spices to anoint Him. Yea, a rich Joseph has taken the place of that poor Joseph who stood by the manger.”

Second, the tomb was a new tomb (Mt. 27:60) where a dead body had never been laid (Lk. 23:54; Jn. 19:41). God did not want His Son to be put into a place of corruption. Jesus “was not a common person, and therefore must not mix with common dust. He that was born from a virgin-womb must rise from a virgin-tomb.” Further, hewn tombs were usually designed for more than one person—a husband and wife or even a whole family. The fact that it was a new sepulcher where no person had ever been laid prevents any suspicion of any other body arising instead of Christ. It also eliminates any idea that Jesus was raised by virtue of some great saint buried there before Him, as occurred when a dead man touched Elisha’s bones (2 Kg. 13:21).

Third, the tomb was hewn out of solid rock (Mt. 27:60; Mk. 15:46; Lk. 23:53). “Jerusalem is encircled by soft limestone rock out of which caves can be quarried or exist naturally. The area outside the walls of Jerusalem has been described as a gigantic cemetery.” These tombs would have one small tunnel as an entrance which would open into a room all carved out of the rock. On the walls of the tomb would be carved shelves or chambers for individual bodies. “It is clear that the tomb-chamber of Joseph’s sepulcher did not contain a shaft or niche (kok) into which the body of Jesus was shoved endwise. In Palestine there are many graves of this character, but this was not one of them, for in that case the angels could not have been sitting at the foot end and at the head end!” Apparently, Joseph’s sepulcher either had a declivity carved into the floor or a carved free-standing bench independent of the walls. Joseph was very rich and this possibility should not be ruled out. In the days of our Lord these tombs were closed off either by a large boulder or by a carved rolling stone placed in a channel cut in the rock for the movement of the stone. The large stones would prevent animals and grave robbers from entering the sepulcher. Joseph and Nicodemus would have had to have help in rolling the stone against the door of Jesus’ tomb. This could have been provided by hired help or by disciples from Galilee that had observed the crucifixion. The fact that Christ’s body was

834 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1205.
836 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1206.
placed in a tomb of solid rock dispels any idea that the disciples tunneled into the tomb to avoid the Roman guards and remove the Savior secretly.

Fourth, this tomb was very close to Golgotha (Jn. 19:41). John notes the importance of this close location because it was the day of preparation (i.e. Friday) and the Sabbath was about to begin. If the burial site had not been in close proximity to Calvary then it would have been virtually impossible for Joseph to get everything done that needed to be done for Christ’s entombment. Once Jesus died at approximately 3:00 pm, Joseph had roughly three hours to go to Pilate and get permission for the body; purchase the linen wrapping material; make arrangements with Nicodemus to get the spices for the body; transport all the materials to Golgotha; wash the body; wrap it with the spices and then transport it to the tomb. When we keep in mind their modes of transportation and the fact that the city was crowded with pilgrims, the proximity of the tomb was crucial. The tomb’s proximity to Calvary and Jerusalem was also important so that Jesus could rise from the dead “in the view of all his enemies, where they had the stone sealed and a guard to keep him in; whereas, had he been carried further off, the matter had been more obscure, and might have seemed more doubtful.”

It is noteworthy that Christ’s disciples took great care not to profane the Sabbath with unnecessary labor. The small amount of time that Joseph had to make arrangements and prepare the Savior’s body did not cause him to put off the interment until the Sabbath day. They also worked diligently to get everything done before the Sabbath began so as not to intrude upon any of the Sabbath time. They regarded the Sabbath day as a time of holy rest and joy in God and did not want any preparation or sorrow to mar their worship. These godly men set a beautiful example to modern professing Christians who often profane the Sabbath day for trivial reasons.

Fifth, the tomb was in a garden (Jn. 19:41). This detail found only in John’s gospel calls our attention to the fact that the sin and death that Adam brought upon the human race in the garden of Eden is expiated and conquered by the second Adam. “In the garden of Eden death and the grave first received their power, and now in a garden they are conquered, disarmed, and triumphed over. In a garden Christ began his passion, and in a garden he would rise and begin his exultation.”

Man was created by God to live with Him in perfect fellowship in a lush garden. It is therefore appropriate that our Lord’s burial and resurrection in a garden brings us paradise restored. Further, it is fitting that the Savior who suffered vicariously in the place of others should be buried in another man’s tomb. Moreover, a lovely identifiable garden right outside the city next to the blood-stained ground of Calvary made the resurrection not only possible but provable. People in Jerusalem would come to know this location and would know that the tomb was empty. This historical event was such a thorn in the Jewish leadership’s side that they bribed the soldiers to say that the disciples stole Jesus away during the night (Mt. 28:13).

Other Notable Doctrines and Applications

When examining the narratives regarding Joseph of Arimathea and the burial of Christ, there are certain important teachings and applications that stand out. First, one cannot help noticing God’s special providential ordering of all these events. If God had not done a work upon Joseph’s heart and he had not come forward at that precise time to request the body of Jesus in order to bury Him in his own tomb, the Scriptures would not have been fulfilled. Our Lord had prophesied, “For as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son

839 George Hutcheson, John, 410.
840 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1206.
of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt. 12:40). Note how God perfectly brought all the needed elements together. The man who came forward to claim and bury Christ just happened to: a) be rich in order to fulfill Isaiah 53:9; b) own a new tomb in which no one had ever been buried; c) own a sepulcher right next to Calvary so the body could be interred before the beginning of the Sabbath; and, d) have Nicodemus as a close friend so Jesus could receive the burial of a King. How many rich men do you think lived in Jerusalem that had a new, unoccupied sepulcher in a garden right next to Calvary? Joseph was probably the only one in the holy city who could fulfill all these conditions. Clearly, God controls everything that comes to pass, even all the seemingly insignificant small details.

Second, the burial of Jesus teaches us that the expiation of our sins is an accomplished fact. It demonstrates that our Lord really died. It shows that the foundation of our justification is laid and that our sins are buried with Him. It also is set forth in Scripture as the basis (along with our Lord’s suffering and death) of our sanctification. Paul says that “we were buried with Him through baptism into death” (Rom. 6:4); that “he who has died has been freed from sin” (Rom. 6:7). Christians are to regard their sins as being covered by the blood of Christ; their old life of sin, lust and service to the devil has been once and forever buried with Him. We now live lives unto God because we arose with our precious Savior (Rom. 6:8ff.). Our old man was put to death and now progressively is beingmortified. Further, our Lord’s stay in the tomb was necessary for His resurrection and our future resurrection and glorification. “Pursuing death, so to speak, to the remotest corner and asylum of his fortress, he expelled him thence, and sanctified our sepulchers, that they might become pleasant resting-places for our bodies, until we awake ‘to behold God’s face in righteousness’ and to ‘be satisfied with his likeness.’”

Third, the burial of the Mediator is presented in Scripture as an important aspect of His humiliation. This is implied in a number of passages. Paul says that before Christ could ascend (glorification) He first had to descend “into the lower parts of the earth” (Eph. 4:9). Genesis teaches that man’s returning to dust is part of the punishment for sin (Gen. 3:19). As our Surety, Jesus had to endure the shame and humiliation of the grave. “Because his being buried was part of the wages of sin, it was an element in our Savior’s humiliation.” The very purpose of the grave is to remove dead bodies, which decay, become putrid, cause disease and smell like filth, away from the living. The grave conceals that which is rotten and repulsive from humanity. The Psalmist says that even though God will not allow the Redeemer to see corruption, nevertheless, the grave is something to be rescued from. “For You will not leave My soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption” (16:10; cf. Ac. 2:27, 31; 13:34, 35). Burial is a descent, a going down into the earth into the darkness and dust of death. Being dead in the earth is, from a biblical standpoint, something negative and humiliating (e.g., Ps. 49:14).

Although the Mediator’s burial is an aspect of His humiliation, our Lord’s stay in the tomb under the power of death was a short one. “Because the penalty for sin had been fully paid, and the guilt of his people’s sin wholly cancelled. If Christ’s body had remained permanently under the power of death, it would have indicated that the penalty for sin had not been fully paid.”

Fourth, the type of burial that Jesus received and the honorable treatment of His dead body by the saints serve as a prelude to His glorification. The Redeemer’s body was not cast into

843 Ibid.
Gehenna or in a mass grave for criminals. Instead, the Savior received the burial of a rich man and a king. “[H]is burial was in many respects honourable, and ‘his sleep’ in the tomb ‘was sweet unto him’ [Jer. 31:26]; because he rested from his labours that were now accomplished, and anticipated the most excellent fruits which were immediately to follow.”

The Lord’s burial points us to His glorious victory. “And what saith Jesus to my soul from the grave? Fear not, ‘I have the keys of death and the grave, I will go with thee, and will surely bring thee up again from thence.’ And observe, my soul, as the grave could not detain thy Lord, thine Head, a prisoner; so neither can the grave, beyond the appointed time, detain any of his members…. ‘Oh death where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy victory? God be praised who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.’”

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