

Chapter 14

Execution of an innocent man, and what followed

In recent years parts of the British press have almost seemed to delight in trying to bring down certain important people whose secrets they have discovered and decided to make public. Finally the ceaseless gossip destroys their victims, sometimes after years of useful service. Others, including a few doctors, are found to have committed really serious offences and have to pay the appropriate penalty.

Jesus had no guilty secrets. The baptism of repentance received at the hands of his cousin John the Baptist had not been for sins of his own, for he had none. Instead he was showing his willingness to identify with sinful human beings. After the baptism, he went about preaching, teaching and performing amazing miracles, particularly acts of healing. He had so much more authority and ability than the usual religious leaders that everyone marvelled at him. For one memorable day crowds of people publicly shouted his praises as he rode into Jerusalem on a young donkey. Despite such a humble mode of transport, the people were quite ready to claim him as King of Israel.¹ Then the atmosphere changed completely.

Hostility grows

The day after this remarkable entry into Jerusalem, Jesus went back to visit the temple. There he found moneychangers who were making a quick profit in the house of his Father, God. He drove them out with some force, saying that the ‘house of prayer’ had been turned into ‘a den of robbers’. This statement was sure to upset the religious leaders who had allowed this to go on but now felt threatened by this carpenter’s son who said God was his Father. Their pride could neither admit to the truth of his words nor think of making changes. Instead they began to work out how to silence him. Their first move was to stir up the people to reject him,² and Jesus knew that it would not be long before he was arrested.

In John 13-17, we read how the Twelve had gathered to celebrate what would be Jesus' last Passover feast with them, to which he gave new meaning. He was going to bring in a new covenant, foreshadowed by the old one. But first he must undergo the sacrificial offering once made by spotless Passover lambs. After he had done that, there would be no more need for such rituals. Peter would later write about 'the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,' through which the gap between God and mankind had been closed.³

After the meal Jesus sent one of them on his way, knowing that this man, Judas, was planning his betrayal. There was a final teaching session with the remaining eleven and a walk to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus withdrew to pray. Although he had asked his three closest friends to watch with him it was now late. They had eaten well and instead they fell asleep. He was in agony of spirit, knowing what lay ahead, yet he was able to willingly submit to the plan he and his Father had laid out long before.⁴ Someone must have woken up enough to overhear at least part of his prayer to give us the words, 'Not my will, but yours be done'. This acceptance of his Father's will and purpose has inspired many sufferers since to trust the outcome to God.

Soon a violent crowd descended on them and bound Jesus, who from then on was handed from place to place. Earlier he had shown such power and authority that to allow this must have been a conscious choice on his part. First he was taken before the religious court to face largely false accusations. Jewish leaders could not order execution themselves but, furious at Jesus' persistent claim to be the Christ, Son of God (as well as Son of Man) they applied to Pilate to use his Roman authority to pass the death sentence.⁵

Jesus had confirmed his claim to be the Christ when challenged about it by the high priest – something mentioned by all four Gospel writers. A lesser man might have taken it back or denied it, rather than signing his own death warrant in this way. Yet he had known for a long time that the priests and lawyers intended to kill him, unaware that this was what he had been prepared for from the beginning. Even so, they would be included in the offer of forgiveness that his self-sacrifice would bring.

A claim to be Messiah was not itself blasphemous but what had made the religious court even angrier was Jesus' confidence that he would finally go to sit at God's right hand, something carefully recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke. To his accusers this claimed equality with God, as did calling God his Father. In their eyes both statements were truly blasphemous. Roman law did not recognise blasphemy as an offence; neither Pilate the Roman governor nor Herod, with whom Pilate consulted, could find any fault in Jesus. Certainly they found nothing deserving the death penalty.⁶ Yet the people, many of whom had so recently been ready to welcome him as Messiah, were now stirred up to shout, 'Crucify him,' and as Luke later reported, 'their shouts prevailed.' The terrible sentence was passed.⁷

Christ crucified

The agonies of crucifixion would have been bad enough were they limited to the most intense physical and emotional suffering. But Jesus, whose purity had never been spoiled by sin, was to be loaded with all the sins of the world, paying its penalty on behalf of us all. This was what he had dreaded most, for God cannot bear to look on sin; at his time of greatest need, Jesus was about to feel deserted by his Father. Darkness would cover the whole land as his spiritual suffering drew from him the anguished cry, 'My God, my God,' (not this time 'my Father') 'why have you forsaken me?'⁸ Never before had they for one moment been separated in spirit. We need to realise that when we speak of 'the sins of the world', it means all wrongs ever done by mankind from the beginning until now – including our own.

In those dark hours, was part of Jesus' suffering a kind of horror movie? Were the wickedness and woes of the world – past, present and future – paraded before his inner eye? Was his spirit bowed down when confronted by the death and damage of war, the cruel torture inflicted by one human being on another, the abuse of little children, the neglect of the poor by the rich, or other miseries forced on many lives. Right up to today, increasingly evil imaginations have planned even more unspeakable things. Did he have a preview of all this? We cannot imagine how his soul was revolted, or how even so he took upon himself the full penalty for all those acts of wickedness as though

he had done them himself. Beside all that, he was burdened with the less colourful sins of pride and arrogance, even among those with a reputation for being religious, and other secret sins still offensive to his pure soul. Yet to bear all this was the agreement he and his Father had made before creation, because although they hated the sins they still loved the sinners. Undeserving as we all are, repentant sinners can be forgiven and past records wiped out as an act of sheer grace.

Many people in the world are truly ignorant of the saving grace of God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son but even supposedly clever people, past and present, have deliberately turned their back. Some choose other gods and philosophies, thereby adding the extra pain of rejection to his suffering. Isaiah tells us that Jesus bore our sicknesses and sorrows, the grief of centuries.⁹ The full cost of the crucifixion remains a dreadful and awesome mystery, while others have thought long and hard about the life and liberty it can mean to us.

Jesus had withstood the tempter after his baptism, when he (falsely) offered to give him the kingdoms of the world in exchange for one act of devil worship. Having resisted him then, perhaps on the cross he was given a glimpse of the world as it would become if generation after generation gave in to Satan's continued efforts to destroy the intended image of God in them. As he suffered the terrible burden of the sins of others, he would know with full force the desperate need of the world for a ransom, a Saviour. In his manifesto, Jesus had offered freedom to the captives and this great act of self-giving would do just that. He provided a way back to God for everyone held captive by the devil, the enemy of souls. No doubt the same enemy had hoped to use the crucifixion as a final attempt to destroy Jesus and defeat God's work through him. The attempt gloriously failed.

Even in the midst of the agony and horror, Jesus evidently kept speaking to his Father and going back to his word as a source of strength. The gospels record seven 'words' Jesus spoke from the cross. The first was a prayer for his Father to forgive those who were executing him (such love!).¹⁰ Two were words of comfort, first for a repentant thief dying on the cross next to his and then for his grieving mother as she watched her son die.^{11, 12} Two were quotations from Psalm 22 and two more came as

he died, declaring his work of atonement finished.^{13,14} At the end, in a loud voice (not just a feeble gasp) he again named his Father as he committed his spirit into his hands.¹⁵ The ordeal was over, the victory won and their relationship restored.

The ransom paid and hostages freed

Today we hear increasingly about people being taken hostage. A costly ransom is often demanded by their captors before hostages can be freed and until this is handed over the captives' lives are at risk. We can imagine their helpless fear and dread, not knowing what hope they have of release and a safe return home. During a hostage crisis someone often goes as a mediator, hoping to settle the dispute and free the captives. Sometimes someone is killed in an attempted rescue and whether or not the ransom is paid, it is altogether a stressful and costly exercise. Jesus knew the danger of spiritual death for those held captive by sin and he acted as the only acceptable mediator.

He once said that he had come to earth to give his life as the ransom needed to save them, and Paul says the same thing in a letter to Timothy:

*'...God our Saviour ... wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.'*¹⁶

In this way, Jesus still longs to bring back those who are far off from him to enjoy a restored and secure relationship with God.¹⁷ When he yielded up his spirit to his Father, the ransom price had been paid in full and sinners could be set free of their guilty burden. Luke reports how, as a sign of his mediation being accepted, the huge curtain in the temple was ripped apart from top to bottom. Until that moment, only the high priest could go into the Most Holy Place beyond the curtain to make the annual offerings to atone for sin. Now the barrier was down, once and for all, giving free access into God's presence for all who trust and accept Jesus' costly offer of forgiveness and a new life.

If we agree to this wonderful exchange (and what hostage would

refuse to be freed?) we have a share in the new covenant that now replaces the old one we considered in chapter 8.¹⁸ By this new agreement, as we confess our personal share in the sins of the world and repent of them, we are offered forgiveness and freedom. We are brought near to the Father again, gradually to regain the lost image of God we were designed for. Surely, our hearts should be full of gratitude and love for the unmerited favour of his grace.

A sorrowful interval

Despite all that he had taught them, this full meaning of Jesus' death had not yet dawned on his disciples. Jesus' body was sealed in a tomb and an armed guard set over it. There was no mistaking that he was dead, and with him the bright hopes of his followers died, too. They had forgotten some of the very important things he had said in his lifetime:

*'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.'*¹⁹

*'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'*²⁰

*'The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.'*²¹

Jesus had clearly known why he had come and what the outcome would be. Matthew, Luke and Mark quote that last statement about his resurrection, given to the Twelve, but forgotten about in their sorrow. Instead, they dwelt on their friend's cruel humiliation, his agonies and final death. They mourned the loss, forgetting that he had spoken of both ransom and resurrection. Perhaps they were still ashamed of their desertion when he was arrested. Peter would feel worst of all. After boldly telling Jesus that he was ready to die for him he had, out of fear, three times denied being part of his company.^{22, 23}

The next day was the most miserable day of their lives for Jesus' disciples. They must have kept going over the dreadful events, burning them into their memories as they kept close together behind locked doors. They even forgot how, at his last tutorial with them, Jesus had promised that after he left them his Spirit would come with counsel and comfort, helping them to remember his teaching.²⁴ This would happen later, ensuring that the Gospel writers gave us a clear and honest record of all the events they so clearly remembered. But for now they had lost hope and felt that life had lost its purpose.

Many people today must feel just like that, some of them after an episode of mob violence and death threats such as happened in the Garden of Gethsemane. Today's victims can know what it is to have had a dear friend killed, or homes and families destroyed. Others experience different kinds of lost hope and often feel so depressed that they don't know what to do or where to go. Yet our Lord Jesus Christ is still able to heal hurting people. The rest of his story has given new hope to many, for it shows how, with God, all things that seemed impossible are possible after all.²⁵ A miracle was about to happen that would have a worldwide impact, then and for evermore.

For further thought

- Jesus had held such authority, so why did he permit the verdict to go against him?
- Have you ever before thought through what Jesus' crucifixion could mean for you?
- Have you ever lost hope and then been surprised by joy?

Further resources

- Jessup G. *Passover*. London: Olive Press, 1980
- McGrath A. *Making sense of the Cross*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994
- Stott J. *The Cross of Christ (20th anniversary edition)*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006

References

1. John 12:12-15
2. Mark 11:15-18
3. 1 Peter 1:18-21
4. Luke 22:41-44
5. Matthew 26:63-66; 27:1-2
6. Luke 23:13-16
7. Luke 23:20-25
8. Mark 15:33-34
9. Isaiah 53:4
10. 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23:33-34)
11. 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.' (Luke 23:39-43)
12. 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' (John 19:25-27)
13. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:45-46), 'I am thirsty.' (John 19:28-29)
14. 'It is finished.' (John 19:30)
15. 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' (Luke 23:45-46)
16. 1 Timothy 2:4-5
17. Ephesians 2:13, 17-22
18. Hebrews 9:15, 24-26
19. John 3:16-17
20. Matthew 20:28
21. Mark 10:33-34
22. John 13:37-38
23. John 18:15-18, 25-27
24. John 14:16-18, 26
25. Luke 18:27