

Historical Jesus 15: Crucifixion

Previously, we were studying the last supper. Judas had already left during the dinner while Jesus taught the rest of the disciples, preparing them for what was to come. After he prayed, they sang a hymn and made their way to the Mt. of Olives.

The Garden

They came to the Garden of Gethsemane⁷⁹ where they were accustomed to go (Lk 22:39). "Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples" (Jn 18:1). This was Jesus' last chance to escape. Judas was on his way, and Jesus knew it. This was the quiet before the storm. Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I pray" (Mk 14:32), then he took only Peter, James, and John a little farther. Jesus became greatly distressed and troubled and said, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch" (Mk 14:34). After this, he went a little farther and fell to the ground and prayed, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mk 1:36).

Jesus did not want to die; he was looking for a way out. He was no Socrates, eagerly anticipating death. He recognized death as the enemy and tried to avoid it if at all possible. In his distress, he cried out to God and then came back and found his disciples sleeping. He asked, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour?" (Mk 14:38). Jesus must have felt so alone. He went away and prayed a second and third time. Each time he came back, they were sleeping. Last of all, Judas approached accompanied by a great crowd: a band of soldiers and officers from chief priests wielding swords, clubs, lanterns, and torches. They arrested him and hauled him off for interrogation.

Before Caiaphas

Caiaphas served as the high priest that year. He had recognized Jesus as a threat but was not planning on doing anything about it until after Passover.

Matthew 26:3-5

3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, 4 and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. 5 But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

Judas must have delighted Caiaphas and the chief priests when he provided a way to take Jesus into custody apart from the crowds. Now that he had Jesus, he needed to act quickly. He wanted the proceedings to have a semblance of justice so he fished for testimony, seeking two witnesses who could corroborate some crime Jesus had committed. Many bore false witness against him. Some said, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands'" (Mk 14:58). But, even on this, they couldn't agree. Caiaphas, frustrated with the whole process, confronted Jesus directly:

Matthew 26:62-68

62 And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" 63 But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 Jesus said to him, "You have said so.

⁷⁹ gethsemane = oil press

But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." 65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. 66 What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." 67 Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, 68 saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

The irony of this situation is so thick. Caiaphas and Jesus both claimed to be God’s supreme representatives on earth, to have a special relationship with God, to have unique and intimate access to God, to speak with God’s authority, and to act on behalf of the people for their good. One of them is legitimate, and the other is an imposter. The one who was spiritually dead will physically live while condemning the one who had life in himself to death. The whole scene reeked of envy and hypocrisy; it was a supreme miscarriage of justice.

Before Pilate

Do you remember about Pilate from class #3? He really disliked the Jews. For example, once he disguised his soldiers among the rabble and had them stab and slice people with their daggers at a prearranged signal, causing a stampede. Pilate hated it when they pushed him around, but sometimes he gave in. For example, when they didn’t want Roman standards in Jerusalem and all offered their necks to Pilate’s soldiers to execute them, he yielded. Another time they complained to the emperor Tiberius because Pilate put shields with the emperor’s name carved on them on a palace in Jerusalem. Tiberius ordered Pilate to comply, which he did begrudgingly. Generally, he was inflexible, dismissive, and pragmatic.

When they brought Jesus to Pilate, he tried to dismiss him immediately saying, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law” (Jn 18:31): That’s when they asked for the death penalty. Consequently, Pilate took Jesus into the Praetorium to interrogate him. He returned and declared, “I find no guilt in him” (Jn 18:38). They responded, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place” (Lk 23:5). Upon discovering Jesus was Galilean, he sent him over to Herod Antipas, who was also in town for the festival. Herod sent him back, and Pilate tried to release him again, appealing to a custom to pardon one prisoner during the feast:

Mark 15:6-14

6 Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. 7 And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. 8 And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. 9 And he answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" 10 For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. 12 And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" 13 And they cried out again, "Crucify him." 14 And Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him."

From my count, Pilate tried to release Jesus no fewer than 8 times!

1	When they first arrived, he tried to dismiss him	Jn 18:29-31
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2	After the first interrogation, he said he found no crime in him	Jn 18:33-38
3	When he found out he was a Galilean, he sent him to Herod	Lk 23:6-7
4	After Herod sent him back, he decided to punish him and release him	Lk 23:13-16
5	When the crowd requested him to release a prisoner, he put Jesus up, but they insisted on Barabbas instead	Mt 27:17-18
6	When the crowd shouted to crucify him, Pilate argued back and suggested he punish and release him instead	Lk 23:21-23
7	After he had Jesus whipped and dressed in a purple robe w/ a crown of thorns, he brought him out and once again told the shouting crowd to crucify him themselves since he didn't find any crime in him	Jn 19:4-6
8	After he heard Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, he brought him in to the Praetorium and tried to release him	Jn 19:7-12

In a panic, Pilate talked to Jesus one last time:

John 19:9-15

9 He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. 10 So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" 11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." 12 From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." 13 So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. 14 Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" 15 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."

Next, Pilate washed his hands (as if such a symbolic act could absolve him of his command to torture and kill Jesus of Nazareth). Then he ordered his soldiers to crucify him.

Crucifixion

The Roman practice of crucifixion was as brutal as it was public. The point was to dishonor someone while deterring others. They stripped Jesus naked and gambled for his clothes before hanging him on a

wooden cross with nails through his wrists and feet. He hung there until 3pm.⁸⁰ They affixed a sign above his head that read, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Once again, we encounter thick irony. The sign's purpose was to identify the charge for which the criminal suffered execution. Yet, this time, it actually proclaimed the truth. Jesus of Nazareth really was (and is) the King of the Jews. However, the sign inspired mockery rather than faith in all but one of those present:

Matthew 27:39-40

39 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

Mark 15:31-32

31 So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe."

Luke 23:36-37

36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine 37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

I can barely read these words without shaking my head in disgust. Such evil is hard to comprehend. Who mocks someone while they are dying? Even so, there was one who stuck up for Jesus:

Luke 23:39-43

39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong:" 42 And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise."⁸¹

This is the ONLY ONE who defended Jesus. He may have been a scoundrel up to this point, but I, for one, want to meet this man someday. I want to shake his hand and say, "Thank you." Amazingly, Jesus made a convert even while his life ebbed away from him. Suddenly, at noon the sky went dark and remained so until Jesus' last moments, three hours later. He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34),⁸² "Father into your hands, I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46); and at last said, "It is finished" (Jn 19:30).

Having endured so many hours of severe abuse, Jesus finally died. Joseph of Arimathea put him in his own, new, rock-hewn tomb. Though many sinned against him, Jesus never lashed out; though reviled,

⁸⁰ Mk 15:25 says it was the third hour when they crucified him. Assuming sunrise was around 6am, that makes the time 9am. Mk 15:33 says darkness fell over the whole land at the sixth hour (12pm). At the ninth hour (3pm) Jesus finally died (Mk 15:34-37).

⁸¹ In v43, I changed the placement of the comma to reflect the fact that Jesus did not need to wait until he came into his Kingdom to vouch for this man. Today, he told him that in the future he would be with him in Paradise (i.e. the Kingdom of God).

⁸² This is a quote from the first line of Psalm 22, which prophesies of many of the details of Jesus' passion.

he did not revile in return; though he suffered, he uttered no threats; instead, he continued entrusting himself to God, the just Judge (1 Peter 2:23). Why did he go through all of this? He had already said why:

Matthew 26:26-28

26 Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." 27 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.