

Plotting - Shakespeare Style

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[0 : 00] and from verse 1 to 5, Matthew 26, from verse 1 to 5. William Shakespeare was the master of framing dastardly plots.

Macbeth and Lydia Macbeth, spurred on by the witch's prophecy, plotted to kill King Duncan of Scotland. Hamlet, spurred on by a strange ghost, plotted to kill Claudius.

Timon, spurred on by his poverty and his hatred for his enemies, plots with Alcibiades to destroy the city of Athens. The list goes on.

If it's intrigue and plotting you want, look no further than William Shakespeare. But then again, perhaps not. Because the Bible, written thousands of years before Macbeth, Hamlet or Timon of Athens, contains enough secret plotting to fill a thousand Shakespearean tragedies.

In our NIV Bibles, Matthew 26, verses 1 through 5 is titled, The Plot to Kill Jesus. And yes, it's a plot, all right.

[1 : 22] After all Jesus has said and done, the chief priests and elders of the people have finally decided to arrest and kill him. Motivated by greed and by anger, they are plotting in secret and framing the most dastardly plot in history.

Even the brilliant William Shakespeare couldn't have dreamt this one up, that Israel would crucify its own king. Then I suppose Shakespeare did not live in days of festival fever in Jerusalem and messianic expectation in Israel.

I, for one, do not believe that the major theme of Matthew 26, verses 1 through 5 is the plot to kill Jesus at all.

Indeed, as with the rest of the Gospels, the theme of this passage is Jesus and his mission of salvation. It's not about a human plot for us to take Jesus' life, but a divine plan for Jesus to give us life.

So the main player in this story is Jesus himself and how the events of this Passover week will define the history of his mission and of our salvation.

[2 : 40] The theme is not how evil men are, but how good God is and how Jesus has come to give his life as a ransom for men. Well, as we leave the Olivet discourse of Jesus at the end of Matthew 25, we're entering into the final hours of Jesus' life and ministry, the climax of his mission, where, as it were, being deeply humbled and suffering greatly, he will triumph over the darkness and will make the ultimate public demonstration of God's love for a sinful humanity.

Remembering that this story is not ultimately about a human plot for us to take Jesus' life, but a divine plan for Jesus to give us his life, from this passage we want to see three things this morning. First, Christ and his sovereignty, then Christ and his suffering, and then Christ and his salvation. First of all then, Christ and his sovereignty.

Christ and his sovereignty. This is the last week of Jesus' life and ministry on earth. On the Friday, he'll be hanging on a Roman cross and dying for the sins of the world.

It is also, as we learn from verse 2, Passover week. Commentators agree that Matthew 26, verses 1 through 5, happened on the Tuesday night of Passover week.

[4 : 21] In other words, it's now less than three days until Jesus' death. He's going to die on the Friday, but back here in Matthew 26, verses 1 through 5, we're still on the Tuesday.

And so on the Tuesday, Jesus says to his disciples, as you know, the Passover is two days away, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified. So in two days from this Tuesday, Jesus is going to be betrayed by Judas Iscariot, and then the day after, he's going to be crucified.

Notice the timescale. Jesus here predicts that in two days, he will be betrayed and handed over. That's the timescale he is setting for the events which must transpire.

They're going to happen in Passover week and be focused down into the Thursday evening where he will be handed over, where he will be literally betrayed by Judas Iscariot.

Now let's move on to the end of our passage, where the chief priests and the elders of the people are plotting against Jesus to arrest and kill him. Notice what they say.

[5 : 38] But not during the feast, or there may be a riot among the people. You see, Jerusalem, because it's Passover week, will be flooded with hundreds of thousands of Jews.

We already know from Jesus' triumphal entry that he had a huge following in Jerusalem. And so from a political perspective, the chief priests and the elders wanted to ensure that things had died down in Jerusalem before they made a move on Jesus.

And so their intention was to arrest Jesus and to kill him, but not until the Passover feast was over. That would have pushed back the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus until at least the week after.

So you see the difference in the timescales between the chief priests and the elders and the timescale of Jesus. Jesus predicts his arrest and betrayal in two days' time.

The chief priests and the elders plan it out for at least a week later. The two timetables, they don't match up. Think about it, and you'll see the difference.

[6 : 56] And the point is that Jesus is not working to their timescale at all. What he has to do, he will do when he wants to do it.

He is not going to dance to this world's tune. He has got his own tune to follow. It's not something that Matthew focuses on a great deal, but often you'll hear in the other Gospels Jesus talking about his hour or his time having not yet come.

And this is what he means, the hour of his suffering and crucifixion. It is for Jesus to set when that hour is, not for the political rulers of Israel.

You see what's coming through loud and clear? It's the sovereignty of Jesus, his self-determination. It is not the chief priests nor the elders who are in charge of this situation.

It is Jesus. One of the fallacies of liberal theology is to suppose that Jesus was the helpless victim of a miscarriage of justice.

[8 : 07] Helpless? Does it strike you from this passage that Jesus was helpless in this situation where the chief priests and elders got it wrong and he got it right?

What comes through loud and clear here is the sovereignty of Jesus. In John 10, 18, Jesus says of himself, no one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. Jesus remained in sovereign control of all things, even down to the very day and hour of his betrayal.

It's not the religious authorities of Israel who were in control of when he would suffer and when he would die. It was always only Jesus because he alone had authority to lay down his life and authority to take it up again.

Now, of course, we're dealing in the area of Jesus' passion, but the principle of his sovereignty holds good in every area of our lives and especially in the life of Christ's bride, the church.

[9 : 29] In the last few years, we have seen what we consider to be a massive decline in church attendance in Scotland. The death of the church has been proudly lauded by the secularists of our day.

God is dead. God is dead. God is dead. And the church is a medieval institution which belongs in the past. And we can be tempted to worry, can we not, that somehow the beautiful bride of Christ is dying in Scotland.

But our worry is not motivated by what we know to be true, but by the statistics presented by a biased media. Furthermore, in the last analysis, who is the king of the church?

Who is sovereign over all things? The world around us, which proclaims the death of the church? Does it not know that Christ is in control of all things, in all places, and at all times?

That if Christ has the authority to lay down his life and take it up again, that if he has the authority to determine the time, place, and means of his death, then Christ alone has authority to determine the future of his bride, the church.

[10 : 49] The church is in the capable hands of Christ, not in the critical hands of the world around us. And the Christ in whose hands we are held says, I am building my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her.

Take this to heart, the sovereignty of Christ. But everything happening to the church and to us as individual Christians, even at this very time, is from the hand of a Jesus who is king, who

determines what and when things happen.

the Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us. The Jesus who is working out his own purposes for our good and for the glory of God.

Take it to heart. Believe it firmly that as the Apostle Paul will later say, all things are working for the good of those who love him. Or as Jesus says, as you know, the Passover is two days away and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.

Christ and his sovereignty. That's the first point. The second point from this passage is Christ and his suffering. Christ and his suffering. I have a minister friend who, when he speaks to you, and it's not very often in my case, he gives you the impression that he has a very good plan for your life.

[12:35] He's well known for it and we've all come to understand that his plans for our lives are generally for his good and not for our good and so we've learned to ignore him.

The chief priests and the elders most certainly did not have a good plan for Jesus' life. As we learn from verse 4, they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and to kill him.

Their minds are set on some Shakespearean plot of craft, guile and deceit of torture, violence and murder. They want Jesus to suffer because, as we'll see in weeks to come, they see him as a threat to their power and authority to the way the establishment works in Israel.

But what of Jesus? Not only does he determine the time of his death, but the manner also. The Son of Man, he says, will be crucified.

Crucifixion was by far the most painful and humiliating means of execution human beings ever devised. The victims of the crucifixion were meant to be pitied if ever pity was a human emotion.

[14:00] It was tortuously painful and humiliating in the extreme. Every faculty of the human being was crushed by the experience of crucifixion.

it was the greatest instrument of human suffering ever invented. You understand, I'm going to speak of the even greater suffering of Jesus compared to that of any other human being in a moment, but until then, let's take it as a fact, there was no more cruel way in all the history of men devised by the minds of sick and twisted people to kill their fellow human beings.

Even in his darkest moments, William Shakespeare could never have conceived such brutality. If he had and had introduced it into one of his plays, it would have been banned on grounds of indecency and excess violence.

As the young folk would say of it, that's gross. It just makes me sick to think of it. It was the death Romans reserved for the most evil of criminals, terrorists, murderers, rapists, traitors.

And in a little over 48 hours from the time Jesus spoke these words in Matthew 26 verse 5, he will suffer the darkest inhumanity, the deepest humiliation.

[15:28] He will be crucified. Now, what makes this so ironic in this context is not merely the means by which Jesus will be killed, but who it is who will be killed.

He says himself, I'm the son of man. The son of man. And we could spend weeks thinking through this title of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

It is most certainly Jesus' favourite self-designation. contrary to what we might expect, it refers not to the humiliation of his humanity, but to the glory of his divinity.

He is the divine son of man, described first in Daniel 7, to whom all authority and glory over all the kingdoms of the world is given.

The glorious divine son who dwells in majesty and unapproachable light. it is this son of man the leaders of Israel will kill.

[16:32] Furthermore, consider that before Easter we were working our way through Matthew 25, where Jesus had been talking of his second coming, the day of judgment when God will divide the human race into those who were prepared and those who were not, those who believed and those who did not, those who expressed their gospel faith in good works and those who did not.

in Matthew 25, verse 31, the judge who was appointed to gather all the nations to himself and to separate them out into those being graciously blessed in heaven and those being severely condemned in hell.

This mighty judge who commands the mighty angels of heaven to act as his court officers, this mighty figure before whom all the nations bow and the angels serve.

This mighty figure is called in verse 31 of chapter 25 the Son of Man. And now just a few verses on from declaring the glory of the Son of Man in his second coming.

Jesus, in Matthew 26, verse 2, declares the suffering of the Son of Man in his crucifixion. That is the great mystery of the gospel.

[17 : 57] How one so great should stoop so low. How the Christ could be treated as a criminal and how he who was the judge of all the nations could be so unjustly judged by wicked men.

How do we apply this truth of the greatest of the great being treated as the lowest of the low? That he who by whom the nations will be judged shall himself so bitterly be rejected.

Supposing you're driving along the Clydeside Expressway and you're in a rage. You're angry with other drivers for driving so slowly. And so you cut up another driver pulling into a lane dangerously close in front of him and because of your recklessness you cause a crash which kills the passenger in the car behind you.

Rather than apologise you curse and swear at the driver behind you whose wife lies dead in the passenger seat because of your recklessness.

business. The police arrive and they charge you with culpable manslaughter. You figure they'll let me off with a caution.

[19 : 25] So you arrive in court on the day of your trial and you wait for the judge to enter. The court officer cries out all rise and everyone stands up as the judge makes his way in.

To your considerable shock the judge is the man whose wife you killed and at whom you cursed and swore in your anger.

I guess there's no good end in this story for us and I wouldn't want to be in your shoes in that courtroom. The application rises from who this Jesus to be crucified is he is the glorious son of man he is the righteous judge who will stand in judgment over all the nations and over us as individuals. Or he seems today in such a position of humility and suffering from where he hangs on the cross he seems to have so little authority over anyone or anything.

We can curse him, we can reject him at our leisure, we can dismiss him, we can add our voice to the calamity of those mocking him if we so choose. We don't have to believe in him, we don't have to have faith in his gospel, that's our choice.

[20 : 49] But know this, a day is coming when the chief priests and the elders will stand before the son they crucified and will shake with fear for they shall be condemned.

will we, will we. Christ and his suffering, Christ and his sovereignty, Christ and his suffering, then finally, Christ and his salvation, Christ and his salvation.

Matthew 26 takes place during Passover week, perhaps the most important festival of the Jewish religion. that time of year, hundreds of thousands of Jews from all over the world would gather in Jerusalem to celebrate the festival which commemorates God's powerful redemption of his people from their slavery in Egypt so long ago.

We know the story, don't we, of how Israel were saved through the sacrifice of lambs, the blood of which they painted on the doorposts and lintels of their houses.

When the angel of God's wrath passed through Egypt, he passed over those houses marked with the blood of the sacrificed lambs. That's the origin of the Passover, the account of the lambs' death and sacrifice.

[22 : 11] The people of God lived and were saved. So there's the context in which all these events in Matthew 26 are taking place. And that's what's uppermost in the minds of the Jewish people of the day, that they owed their existence as a nation to the bloody sacrifice of lambs.

During that festival week, hundreds and thousands more lambs and bulls and goats would be sacrificed in the temple in Jerusalem and religious fervor would reach fever pitch.

The people of God would speak of sacrifice and suffering. Psalms like Psalm 51 and Psalm 22, Psalms like Psalm 40 and Psalm 130.

They'd know they owed their existence as a nation to God's gracious provision of their lambs, slaughtered and sacrificed on their behalf in Egypt to take away their sins and to be punished in their place.

And it's this week Jesus chooses the time for his crucifixion. And it's here in Jerusalem that he will be slaughtered and he will be killed. The references you see are too clear to be ignored, that Jesus is offering himself as the sacrificial lamb who will take the sins of his people away, bearing the wrath of God against us so that we might be saved from the condemnation of our sin and the slavery to which we have been bound since the day we were born.

[23 : 48] He will be the New Testament Passover, the sacrificial lamb of God to which all the lambs sacrificed over the centuries by the Jews pointed. He, the firstborn of God, shall endure the punishment we deserved as a human race for our defiance of God and our rebellion against him.

Here then is where his sovereignty and his suffering meet. When the judge becomes the judged, and the king becomes the criminal, though he had done no wrong, he determines the manner and the time and the place of his death so that he might be the Paschal Passover lamb who takes away the sins of his people by bearing their punishment and their death.

How glorious a truth. A truth, William Shakespeare, in even his greatest of compositions could never have imagined that the glorious Son of Man, in whom all sovereignty and righteousness dwells, should, because of his everlasting and infinite love for his people, give himself as the sacrifice for their sin.

Enduring not just any death, but the cruel death of the cross, where not just his body and his emotions were crushed, but his innocent soul was punished on account of our criminality.

How then can we apply this greatest of truths, that Jesus is our Passover lamb, suffering and dying on the cross? Surely, if nothing else than this, that we choose on whose side we fall.

[25 : 40] Shall we be among the disciples who believe in him and follow him? Yes, even though we may falter in the faith. Or shall we be among the chief priests and the elders plotting against him?

There is, you see, in this passage, no middle ground. On account of what he has done for us on the cross, by dying as our Passover lamb, we shall be sheep and not goats.

We shall be wise and not foolish. We shall be good and not lazy servants. We shall believe and hold to the gospel of his grace. But if anyone, if anyone today should believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, if anyone should call him Lord and follow him into lifelong discipleship, all Jesus did upon the cross, he shall have done for that person.

Lord and Lady Macbeth suffered terribly for their plotting against King Duncan. The chief priests and the elders of the people, 40 years later, would suffer unimaginable pain on account of their murder of Jesus.

But not us. Surely, surely not us. Yes, us. If we choose to side with them against Jesus. And yet, there's no need.

[27 : 06] For even at this very point, at the end of Easter week, when we've been remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's Passover lamb, there is another opportunity for us to change sides.

To go from plotting against Jesus to following him. for him to give us the life he earned for us on the cross. So what then shall it be?

Death or life? We shall conclude now as we sing the hymn Be Thou My Vision.

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart.