

Innocent Blood

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is from Matthew chapter 27, verses 1 to 26.

! When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus! Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.

They said, what is that to us? See to it yourself. And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself.

But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, it is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money. So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers.

Therefore that field has been called the field of blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me.

[1 : 33] Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? Jesus said, You have said so? But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer.

Then Pilate said to him, Do you not hear how many things they testify against you? But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the feast, the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted, and they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, Whom do you want me to release for you, Barabbas or Jesus, who is called the Christ?

For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, Which of the two do you want me to release for you?

[2 : 44] And they said, Barabbas. Pilate said to them, Then what shall I do with Jesus, who is called Christ? They all said, Let him be crucified. And he said, Why?

What evil has he done? But they shouted all the more, Let him be crucified. So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, I am innocent of this man's blood.

See to it yourselves. And all the people answered, His blood be on us and on our children. Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

Hear the word of the Lord. Well, good morning, everyone.

If you're visiting this morning, my name's David. I'm a pastor here. A really warm welcome to you.

Well, will you pray with me as we come to God's word? Let's pray.

[3 : 55] Let's pray. Oh, Father, as we just sang a prayer, really, that we are asking with one voice.

Lord, I don't want us to take that for granted, how extremely difficult unity is. But we praise you, that it's your blood that unifies us.

So I pray that as we go through this passage today, that you would speak into each of our hearts, but that you would draw us into a deeper worship of you and unify us in you.

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, in the UK, a young man named Sam Hallam went to prison for murder in 2005.

He was 18 years old. Now, he spent seven years in prison. And then an appeal forced the police to look at his mobile phone, and there was proof he was somewhere completely different when the murder occurred.

[5 : 08] The judge said, this is a serious miscarriage of justice. Now, Sam's father ended his own life when he first heard Sam get sentenced.

He never got to hear his son declared innocence. If you've been to church most of your life like me, our struggle coming to these events is we've heard it so many times.

But Charlie Skrine, a pastor in the UK, asked a helpful question. Yes, the death of Christ was God's plan before time. He knew he'd be raised to life.

He knew he would be praising the cross for all eternity. So how much does the father mind the murder of his innocent son? How much does the father mind?

And who is guilty? Like Sam Hallam, a father is watching his son get betrayed by a friend for money.

[6 : 25] Arrested in the night. Basically kidnapped. Tried by judges who decided he was guilty. Ages beforehand, before the trial. He's got no appeal.

He's mistreated and mocked at every stage. Jesus, the son of God, is the most precious, innocent blood in history. And there is a father watching. How much does he mind?

I think we see a lot of attempts of the characters in this story.

A lot of attempts of people trying to get rid of their guilt in this murder. I think people... We're going to see different ways they try and do it.

So let's jump in. We're in Matthew 27. Let's look at Judas. I wonder why Matthew draws our attention to Judas and this field of blood.

[7 : 30] If you read the story, the narrative, verse 2 would have nicely went straight to verse 11. They delivered him over to Pilate, the governor.

Verse 11. Now Jesus stood before the governor. Why this focus on Judas? Why does Matthew... What does he want us to see? Well, Judas, like Peter, had realised he'd failed.

Judas comes to a personal realisation. For whatever reason, he's come to a realisation that he's overwhelmed with guilt. But the main focus here is on the leaders and their response, what they do with this blood money.

We're not really told what triggered Judas' remorse. I don't think it was true repentance. Did he not realise his betrayal would end in his friend's death?

Did he not realise that? Maybe not. Or, did he know full well it would end in his death, but then he saw it?

[8 : 45] Doesn't your own conscience do that sometimes? You know what the consequences will be, but when you see it, it hits you. Maybe that's what's going on.

Whatever caused it, Judas is overwhelmed with his real guilt. We can be overwhelmed with false guilt, but this is real guilt. This isn't repentance.

The reason I don't think it is repentance, he doesn't go to Jesus with his guilt. We don't see him in the temple praying Psalm 51. He's not beating his breast saying, have mercy on me, a sinner.

You know, he goes back and tries to push the money back. He's trying to undo it, I think. It's not repentance.

It's this, it's a pathetic attempt to undo his actions. I have sinned by betraying innocent blood, throwing the 30 pieces of silver back into the temple where it came from.

[9 : 51] But he can't. He can't undo his guilt. It doesn't work. He remains under God's judgment. So there's Judas.

That's what he does with his guilt. He tries to undo his actions. It doesn't work. But then we've got the priests. And I've always been focused on Judas, but I think this passage, Matthew wants us to focus on the priests here in their response.

They're the representatives of the covenant people of God. Let me say provocatively what I think we see here. And then I want to try and show you that.

In Judas' hanging, in his unclean death, we see the death of Israel. In their unique relationship with God.

Okay, please come with me and see if you agree. Matthew wants us to see through these chief priests in their facade.

[11:06] As if they're holy. Here they have further testimony before Jesus is executed of his innocence.

And their response is, what is that to us? See to it yourself. That's your responsibility. You deal with it. Don't try and bring us into it.

They try and distance themselves from the guilt. That's your responsibility. At youth group, we used to play two truths and a lie.

I don't know if you guys still do that. It's a way of... Okay, I got a thumbs up. It's a way of getting to know each other. Here we've got two truths and a lie. Jesus is innocent. Truth.

Judas is guilty. And verse 4 to 8 is all a lie. The chief priests, they're just lying all the way through here.

[12:07] They won't take responsibility for an innocent man's death. So what do they do? Judas, it's on you. They're passing the buck. And then they parade their holiness. Okay, we can take money from the temple to purchase someone's blood, but we can't then take that money and put it back in the temple.

That would be unclean in God's law. Okay, they're parading their holiness. They think they're holy. And then they buy this field. What can we do with this money? Let's do this good deed. Let's buy a field for foreigners so that they have a dignified burial place.

It's a good deed. Let's do... So, well done, chief priests. Judas put it all on Judas. We're holy. We can't accept it into the temple.

And we just did a good deed. They try and bury their guilt in their good deed.

[13:14] But then Matthew gives us God's authoritative explanation of what this field of blood means. And he says the prophet Jeremiah, and then he actually quotes Zechariah.

So it's a bit confusing. But I think the pattern we see in Jeremiah and then Zechariah, Matthew the apostle says we see that same pattern repeating itself in a greater extent in Jesus.

So let's... The point is God sees right through to their guilt. They can't bury it. They can't pretend they're holy. He sees it. So we need a bit of context here to get our heads around it.

So Zechariah 11. Zechariah, he's a prophet. He's acting out the prophecy. And he's holding two shepherd's staffs. He's got one called favor, one called union.

And he drives out the false leaders of God's people. He gets rid of the false shepherds. So God has appointed this true good shepherd in Zechariah 11.

[14:23] But then the people reject the good shepherd. And Zechariah, he takes the staff called God's favor and he breaks it.

And we're told there what that means there. Annuling the covenant. He was... He goes...

After he does this, by the way, he's like, what are you going to pay me now? He's just told them the covenant is annulled. And he goes, what are you going to pay me for all my months of work? And they give him 30 pieces of silver.

And he's like, that's a ridiculous payment. Throws it back into the temple to the potter. The sheep, the flock, rejecting God's appointed good shepherd.

And the consequence, the covenant is annulled. It's broken. Then in Jeremiah 19, again, we have the potter's field where potters would go to get their clay.

[15:32] And he's acting out prophecy again. He takes a piece of pottery in his hand. And he says this within the earshot of the elders of the people.

Jeremiah 19, 3 to 6. Where's verse 3? There it is. Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.

Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. Because the people have forsaken me and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known.

And because they have filled this place with the blood of innocence. And have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind.

Therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the sun of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter.

[16:50] The blood of innocence. And he smashes the pottery and says, it can't be mended. That's how much this father minds the blood of his son.

Both Jeremiah and Zechariah say, God sees through the chief priests in their false purity, and he minds very much the murder of his innocent son, so much that the covenant, a unique relationship is broken.

It can't be mended. Now, don't think at this point, Matthew is trying to lay all the blame at Jewish feet.

If you go there in your mind, you're missing Matthew's point. Hold on, I need to find my place again. I should have put my bookmark. There we are.

So let's go to Pilate. Just one more comment, sorry, about the Jews. God always has a faithful remnant.

[18 : 13] Always. So we change from looking at the Jewish response to Jesus and their guilt. Now we're going to the Gentile, Pilate, the Roman governor representing the nations.

Is he responsible for Jesus' death? Verse 24 seems to be the key, the key verse. It's the same words that the chief priests say. He took water and washed his hands before the crowd saying, I am innocent of this man's blood.

See to it yourselves. It's not on me. You guys. That's your responsibility. That's your guilt.

But Pilate is the judge. He's the one giving the verdict. It's his verdict that counts. And he knows Jesus is innocent. He questions him.

Are you a political threat to Rome? Is his question. And therefore, if you are, you are liable to the death penalty. Jesus says, you have said so.

[19 : 24] Now it's a bit of a strange response. You have said so. Are you a king? Are you... But are you a political king?

Like, if you think of other religions, Buddha would answer that question. No. No, no. It's nothing to do with this world. Muhammad would say yes.

Jesus is... There's this yes and no. I am a king. I am going to rule the world. But John's gospel fleshes this out more for us. My kingdom's not of this world.

It's this yes and no. I'm not a threat as you... As you understand political king. So he's not denying being a king, but he's not a political king.

And Pilate knows he's innocent. He doesn't see him as a threat at all. He's judged so many zealots trying to rebel against Rome, this Pilate would have.

[20 : 25] He's blown away when Jesus is silent. All these accusations thrown at Jesus and he's silent. The defence rests.

And Pilate is greatly amazed. He knows the charges are false. Verse 18.

He knows the real motives of the chief priests here. It is out of envy. Jesus is getting control of the crowds.

They want control. It's out of envy. So he knows he's innocent. He's not a threat. He knows the real motives of what's going on here. God even seems to graciously give his wife a dream.

He's working within his own Roman pagan worldview, giving a dream. Have nothing to do with this righteous man. Verse 23.

[21 : 30] He says to the crowd, what evil has he done? He knows he's innocent. Pilate knows he's innocent. But he tries to satisfy the crowds by having Jesus whipped, scourged.

Which apparently they had little pieces of metal at the end of the whip. And I won't keep describing that. He tried to pacify the crowd without giving Jesus the death sentence.

He tries to put him alongside Barabbas. Get the crowd to go against the chief priests. And he tries to get him released. That way he's trying to protest his innocence. What has he done? What evil has he done?

He knows justice demands release. But then he sees a riot starting. And if a riot breaks out, his job is on the line. Maybe even his own life.

And so he took the self-protecting path and just washes his hands. You go kill him. But I'm innocent. So that's Pilate's attempt.

[22 : 33] He knows he's innocent. He tries to wash his hand and go, that's your responsibility. Shift the blame. Then we've got the crowd.

The crowd are given the choice. Guilty Barabbas, who rebelled against Rome and was a murderer. Maybe they saw him as a hero.

Not quite sure. His rebellion against Rome. Guilty Barabbas, innocent Jesus. And they're persuaded and follow the crowd.

Crucify him. Crucify him. And then you get that crazy verse 25.

His blood be on us and on our children. Leave the children out of it. They think they can handle the consequences of their guilt if they're wrong.

[23 : 41] His blood be on us and our children. I just don't think... I could be wrong about this. I'm not sure any single one of them would have said that if they were on their own.

I suspect it was because the crowd was saying it together. Yeah, sure. Everyone's saying it. His blood be on us. I think of people today who...

They talk about hell as a barbecue with your mates. I think you can only say that sort of thing if lots of people are saying it. Otherwise, it's a terrifying prospect if you think...

On your own, you're going to be facing this. They think they can bear the consequences of guilt. So Judas couldn't undo his guilt.

Chief priests couldn't... Kind of bury their guilt in good deeds. Pilate couldn't wash his hands and shift the blame for his guilt.

[24 : 58] The crowds, they cannot bear the consequences of the guilt. Something struck me after a small group looking at this passage.

Have you noticed Jesus in this scene? Not really. Where is he? He's silent.

He's silent. Jesus is silent while everyone else is frantic. And I think Matthew wants us to hear that silence.

He is silent until we hear him on the cross once more. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He's silent throughout all this.

I don't think he's just our example to follow. He is our example to follow in entrusting ourselves to our faithful creator in the face of injustice and to continue to do good.

[26 : 21] But if he's just your example, that will crush you because I don't think anyone can really live up fully to that. He's silent, swapping places with us, taking our guilt.

Like Barabbas, the innocent for the guilty, he is swapping places with you and me. Isaiah 53.

He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him. He was put to him to grief. When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days.

The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

[27 : 53] He's silently swapping places, taking our guilt. So who's guilty of the murder of the Son of God?

Matthew wants us to see the whole world. The whole world. All of us. If somehow God could manifest his presence with you throughout the day, if he just accompanied you as you went to work and as you watch TV and as you sit down for dinner and you do the laundry, he's just with you. He not only hears everything you do, but he sees everything you do, and he also hears that inner voice in your head, your processing.

How long would it be before you really wish he wasn't present? How long would it be? Would you last the day? I'm not sure if I'd last the day.

When he sees that thing, that greed, that thing I want, when I really want to outburst.

[29 : 15] How long would it be before we want his presence gone? How long would it be before we want his presence gone? John Stott, in his classic book, *The Cross of Christ*, says we can see ourselves in the envy of the religious leaders to remain in control.

He says this, We resent his intrusions into our privacy, his demand for our worship, his expectation of our obedience.

Why can't he mind his own business? We too want to get rid of him. We push him out. John Stott keeps going, Judas was not exceptional.

Jesus had said that it was impossible to serve God and money. Judas chose money. Many others have done the same. Many. Throughout what we see in the story of those, Peter's failures, Judas in his greed, in his betrayal, the priests, they want to maintain control, the witnesses in their lives, the crowd, they're persuaded away from the truth so easily.

The governor is weak and cowardly, doesn't do what he knows is right. We shouldn't just be going, Oh, aren't they bad people? We're meant to be seeing ourselves.

[30 : 59] One person put it like this, only the man or woman who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross may claim his share in its grace.

If you own your share of the guilt, you can also take your share of the grace in the cross. We hear that grace when God sends Peter in Acts 3.

You might remember it. You killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. Repent, therefore, and turn back that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.

That's incredibly gracious to send Peter back with that message. You killed the author of life. Now come and I'll blot your sins out in times of refreshing.

That's the path to take with your guilt, with my guilt. His blood is on us. We don't get to choose that. [32 : 29] We're just like the people in the story. His blood is on us. We do get to choose how it's on us. God sees right through our attempts to deal with our guilt in pretty pathetic ways, or his blood can take our guilt.

So if you want times of refreshing, here's the way. If there's that private sin, that habitual sin, you can't shake it.

Or maybe you've got this huge sin from your past. It just, it's always in the back of your mind. One thing people, I've tried it to, is just be really busy with church and good deeds.

Bury that guilt in being really good. It's not the way. Look at him, swapping places with you.

He's taken your guilt. Your sin is blotted out in God's eyes. It's blotted out. He's got better than 20-20 vision. God, if he says it's blotted out, it's blotted out.

[33 : 52] The times of refreshing may come. I think of those who feel like you've failed your spouse in a big way, or your children, or your parents, and you're trying desperately to undo it.

Now, by all means, make good changes. Please, make good changes in your life, but you can't undo the guilt.

You've got to let him swap places. He has swapped places. Believe it. Confess it. That's how you get times of refreshing. Relational conflict.

You think refreshing will come if only they finally admit they're the majority of the blame, at least. Maybe not all the blame, at least the majority. If you answer every accusation, you think times of refreshing will come.

No. Jesus says, look at the plank in your own eye first. I went to the slaughter for that pride in your heart.

[35 : 03] That's how you get refreshing in relational conflict.

He took our guilt. He swapped places. At times of refreshing. Now, if we rejoice in this, we'll want it for ourselves, but we'll want to share it with others.

So I just want to finish with a story that will, I'm hoping, will show the power of him swapping places and just how good it is to share this news with others.

So, there was a US military chaplain, Henry. He was sent to minister to Nazi war criminals after World War II.

Now, Henry had preached the gospel to so many people before that. Forgiveness, repentance, like, you can imagine, right, if you're in that situation, wrestling, can these war criminals, can there even be real repentance?

[36 : 25] Is there forgiveness for these men? So Henry wrestled with that and he met and ministered to Wilhelm, I can't pronounce his last name so I'm not going to try, Wilhelm, really high up under Hitler, really high up.

and Henry could later describe this Nazi war criminal as my friend. Now, he goes to the gallows for his crimes, he pays the consequences but as he's at the gallows, he prays a prayer in German, again, I'll do it in English but Christ's blood and judgment are my adornment and robe of honour. Therein I will stand before God when I go to God. Amen. And then he looks at Henry and says, I thank you and all who sent you with all my heart.

do you our father please help us not downplay our evil against you because it's only when we share in the guilt of the murder of your son that we see just how amazing your grace is that you would use that injustice and blot out our sin and take our guilt willingly our father I pray that your spirit might minister this truth into each of our hearts and us as a church family so that times of refreshing will come and we will honour you and I pray this in Jesus name, Amen

Amen Amen Amen