

Matthew 27:1-26

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[0 : 00] Well, the passage we have today, Matthew 27, 1 to 26, is filled with darkness and despair and death. And things seem to go from bad to worse.

And although Jesus is at the centre of it, he just doesn't seem to be doing anything. In fact, he only speaks once down there in verse 11. It is, in fact, the day of Jesus' death.

And it begins in verses 1 and 2. After the all-night session before the Sanhedrin, his fake trial, where he's been bound and beaten and abused.

But the problem for the chief priests and elders is they can't just murder him at their own hands. They have to take him and convince the Roman authorities to do that for them.

So again in the morning, they tie him up and they lead him off to Pontius Pilate to try and convince Pilate to kill Jesus for them. And our section ends at verse 26.

[1 : 02] As you can see, if you have a Bible open in front of you, Pilate releases this terrorist called Barabbas. He then has Jesus scourged and then he delivers him up to be crucified.

It's a very familiar passage. We're very familiar with this part of the Bible. And it's easy to skim along the surface of the text because of that and miss what's really going on.

It's a great crisis in Jerusalem. And it's easy in crises to miss what's really going on. And one of the things the word of God does for us is it lifts the lid on what God is doing, what's really going on.

It's fascinating where the focus is not. You know, the focus is not on Jesus' physical suffering. His scourging, for example, which is a brutal whipping with nine tails and pieces of metal in it.

And a lot of people died from scourging. It's dismissed in one word in verse 26. The focus is not on Jesus' suffering. And Judas and Pilate are not made out to be monsters.

[2 : 12] They are men, real men, who are struggling with this, making bad decisions against Jesus Christ. And the other thing is that it's not a straightforward narrative.

If you look at the section 1 to 26, only a quarter of it is narrative itself. Matthew keeps inserting things to show us where he really wants to go.

He inserts the section about Judas' suicide. He inserts the section about Pilate's wife. He inserts the section none of the other Gospels have about Barabbas. And at the same time as he does this, he keeps telling us these things all take place to fulfill what God has promised through his prophets in the Old Testament.

So how does this passage lift the lid on what's really going on? It does it by presenting three contrasts. These three contrasts show us what God is doing in the midst of crisis.

Number one, the first contrast is between Judas and Peter. Now Matthew very much wants us to understand this contrast. He interrupts the flow of the narrative in verse 3 to 10 with a terrible story of Judas' remorse and death.

[3 : 26] And it comes immediately after Peter's betrayal at the end of chapter 26. Now I don't think Matthew would have approved of the chapter division at the beginning of chapter 27.

Because you see, when the morning came, those first words are a mirror image of the rooster crowing in the last verse of chapter 26. Both Peter and Judas are in the midst of a betrayal.

And the bigger the crisis for both of them, as in the bigger the crisis for all of us, the more it uncovers what's really important in our lives, what we really believe. You remember Peter was supremely confident in his own spiritual stability.

He said to Jesus, all the others will betray you, looking around at the other 11 apostles. They'll all betray you, but I won't, not me. And we leave him at the end of chapter 26 as he's weeping bitterly.

The word is wailing loudly as he despairs of his self-confidence, which is not a bad place to be. And then Judas, who has betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, has a change of mind of sorts.

[4 : 37] It's not really a change of mind. It's a change of feeling. And in verse 3, although the ESV says he changes his mind, it's not the usual word for repentance.

It's a word for regret. He's sorry about the consequences of what he's done, but he does not turn back to God for forgiveness. It's wonderful how restrained the gospel writers are in describing Judas and all those around Jesus at this time.

They don't make Judas out to be a monster, but a real man who loves money and is lost. And he sees Jesus is condemned to death.

He brings the 30 pieces of silver back to the chief priests. And if you look at verse 3, if you look down there at verse 3, he even says, I have sinned betraying innocent blood.

It's an astonishing detail. You know, he chose to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. And at the same time, he knew Jesus was innocent. Can you imagine what a coup it would have been if the chief priests and the elders had been able to force Judas to testify against Jesus?

[5 : 49] You know, he'd been with him every day for three years. If anyone could dish the dirt on Jesus, it would be this Judas. But the fact that Judas never testified and the fact that he here confesses Jesus to be innocent gives a wonderful witness to the perfect sinless life of Jesus Christ.

And he knows what he's done is wrong. He even calls it sin and he confesses it to the priests. He's in absolute despair. And the priests respond with a toxic piece of pastoral care.

They say to him, basically, it's not our problem. That's your problem. And so Jesus takes the pieces of silver and hurls them over the top of the priests in the temple into the holy place of the temple, which gives the chief priests their own problem.

And then he goes out and he takes his own life by hanging. What's the difference between Judas and Peter? Well, the apostle Paul later in 2 Corinthians 7 distinguishes between godly grief and worldly grief.

Worldly grief, which is Judas grief, is remorse. It's saying what I've done is wrong. It is my failure. I feel guilty. I feel wretched about what I've done.

[7 : 05] But it goes no further. I don't turn back to God for forgiveness. In fact, I feel it's too big for God to handle. My sin is too great for God to forgive.

It's outside his competence. Worldly grief is a form of pride. Verses 9 and 10 tell us that Judas' actions do fulfill the plan of God, which doesn't excuse Judas, but shows that God is most high, much higher than any sin and any guilt.

And if Judas had just lifted his eyes and had a look at Jesus and remember that Jesus had said that he has come to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, his story may have ended a little differently.

But godly grief, true repentance, is centered on God. It's more than feeling guilty. It's a movement of my heart toward God. It's humbling myself before him.

It's acknowledging my sin and asking him to help me turn away from sin, to take away my guilt. It's the relief of knowing his forgiveness. And we can't look at it now, but if you want to chase through the story of Peter's repentance, you can read John chapter 21.

[8 : 23] There's the first contrast, Judas and Peter. The second contrast is between Pilate and Mrs. Pilate. And on staff, we voted to call him Pilate and Mrs. Pilate.

It's just a little bit of humor for you. Again, Pilate is not made out to be a monster. In verse 11, his first words to Jesus are, Are you the king of the Jews?

The last time we heard this title for Jesus was by the wise men, the Magi in chapter 2. It's only ever used on the lips of pagans about Jesus.

The wise men, Pilate uses it. The soldiers use it in the next section. And then when Jesus is nailed up on the cross, it's written up as the charge against him.

This is Jesus, the king of the Jews. And Jesus' response to Pilate is, yes, but there's more to it. And from here on in, Jesus is silent.

[9 : 20] He makes no response. And his silence and his composure is very impressive to Pilate. While the chief priests and the elders hurl accusations against Jesus, Jesus' silence makes this impression.

And so at the end of verse 14, we read that Pilate is greatly amazed. This is always a positive term. He's greatly impressed. And in verse 18, if you look down to the text, Pilate sees straight through the chief priests that what's motivating them is nothing other than common envy.

Pilate knows the charges are wrong. He sees that the motivation for them is just radical jealousy. And immediately in verse 19, as he is struggling with this, we hear from Pilate's wife.

Verse 19, we read, 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. We don't know anything about her apart from what's written here. She's clearly a Roman Gentile married to a Roman soldier who then became the governor of this province. But something has gripped her.

[10:41] It's so urgent that she somehow manages to get the message through to her husband, who's sitting on the judgment seat. And she takes all her courage in her hands.

And she believes what's going on is a great injustice. And she is the only one. She's the only person to try and lift a finger to stop Jesus' death.

She's received a dream, just as the wise men did back at the beginning of the gospel. It's a kind of a revelation from God. And she is convinced of the innocence of Jesus.

In fact, she calls him that righteous man. And she knows that her husband, Pilate, has final say on Jesus. And so she does what she can to speak up for Jesus.

But it's already too late. He's already offered another prisoner release. And the chief priests and elders have managed to manipulate the crowd into a frenzy. They cry for blood in verse 22.

[11:38] Let him be crucified. Verse 23. Again, Pilate makes the point that he's completely innocent. Verse 24. Although he's convinced that he too is being manipulated by the Jewish authorities, he's convinced that Jesus is innocent.

He's heard the message from his wife. He's convinced that to murder this guy, Jesus, would be to commit murder. But he's too weak. And his final gesture to try and prove his innocence is to wash his hands in front of the crowd and to allow an innocent man to be counted guilty so that he, the guilty person, might pretend to be innocent.

He says, I'm innocent of this man's blood. But he's not. And all the people cry out, his blood be on us and on our children. Now, you know, this has been horrifically abused over the centuries, particularly by Christians against the Jews.

And we recognize that anti-Semitism in any form is an evil and we stand against it. Matthew's precise point here is that both Jews and Gentiles, weak and strong, male and female, we all have the blood of Jesus on us.

And Pilate, Pilate's picture, the picture of Pilate here is a picture of spiritual apathy. He knows Jesus is the righteous one.

[13:10] He knows he's being weak and not siding with Jesus. He knows that washing his hand is not going to deal with any of his guilt. But he's apathetic and he allows things to happen.

And I think in some ways, Pilate and Judas are alike. Because spiritual apathy is a form of giving up. Pretending to be spiritual neutral in the face of Jesus Christ is a form of spiritual suicide.

And that's the second contrast. The third contrast is Barabbas and Jesus. One lucky criminal, Barabbas. In verse 16, he's called a notorious prisoner.

He's on death row, deservedly. He's a violent man who led a violent uprising with a gang of violent men to try and throw off Rome. He's a killer for a cause.

And he and his gang were to be crucified. It's quite possible, commentators point out, that the two men who were crucified either side of Jesus were part of Barabbas' gang. The only reason Pilate names Barabbas to the crowd is that to swap Barabbas for Jesus is so ridiculously uneven.

[14:25] He doesn't think the crowd would ever go for it. I mean, Barabbas is a bad man who deserves to die. Jesus is an innocent, righteous man who hasn't done anything wrong, really. And just think about Barabbas.

Without his knowledge or without his permission, the sinless son of God goes and dies in his place. It is a terrible and a wonderful substitution.

Jesus is given over to death. Barabbas suddenly finds himself free to live. It's amazing. And I think it brings us to the heart of what is happening here and the heart of what is happening for us now.

Does Barabbas hear the crowd chanting, crucify him, crucify him? Does he think my time has come? Wait. The soldiers are dragging another man to be scourged.

And then they take Barabbas and they release him. And Jesus takes Barabbas' death. Jesus bears the guilt and the shame and the disgrace that Barabbas deserves.

[15 : 28] And Barabbas walks free. It's only by substituting for him that Barabbas can walk free. This is what we call the great exchange. This too was prophesied in the Old Testament.

In Isaiah 53, we read these words about Jesus. He was oppressed and he was afflicted. Yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter.

Like a sheep before the shearers is silent. So he opened not his mouth. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way.

But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity, the impurity, the guilt, the unrighteousness of us all. And we don't know how Barabbas responded.

But I do think as we come through these three contrasts, we're meant to stand in Barabbas' sandals. Don't despair like Judas. Don't wash your hands like Pilate.

[16 : 31] But look at the suffering, sacrificial Jesus Christ dying for you, bearing your cross. See him receiving what you and I deserve and giving us what we don't deserve.

Free forgiveness. Eternal life. Glory with God in heaven forever. Amen. Amen. Amen.