

Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13—53:12; Psalm 22; John 18:1—19:42; Hebrews 4:14-16 and 5:7-9 or 10:16-25

Good Friday is the Friday before Easter on which the Church remembers the crucifixion of Christ. It is a tradition from the earliest days of the Church that Jesus' trial and crucifixion occurred on a Friday – the Friday of Holy Week. It is obviously called "*Good Friday*", not because it was "good" for Jesus, but that it was "good" for us in that God made Christ's death that day the atonement for our sins.

There are many ways that Good Friday has been celebrated by the church over the centuries. One such observance is that of "lessons and prayers" in which the full account of Jesus' trial and execution are read in its entirety from one of the Gospels, with these scripture lessons separated by prayers and somber hymns (e.g., "O Sacred Head Now Wounded"). A second observance is the Veneration of the Cross, from which today's custom of shrouding the cross in black comes. A third observance is the Stations of the Cross. A fourth is the well-known three-hour service held from noon until 3:00 p.m., likely when Christ hung on the cross; that was a custom introduced to Christendom by the Jesuits, but now is a popular shared time of worship of local congregations of many denominations in a given city or town. A fifth way the church has traditionally celebrated Good Friday is through a Tenebrae service; the word "tenebrae" means "darkness". It is an adaptation of the "lessons and prayers" service with the sanctuary lights and/or candles being progressively extinguished after each lesson until the service ends in darkness. In the Roman Catholic tradition, Good Friday and Holy Saturday (the day after Good Friday) are the only days in the year on which no celebration of the Mass takes place.

The color of stoles, vestments, and altar or communion cloths are all changed for Good Friday to black (rather than the traditional purple for Lent). They remain black until Easter Sunday. Some Easter Sunday services incorporate into them the changing of the colors from black to white, with the cross shrouded in black at the beginning of the Easter service, then being stripped from the cross with the cry, "The Lord is risen" and replaced with the white of Easter.

If the church holds no Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, Good Friday concludes the church's celebration of Lent.

John 18:1 – 19:42 is the Gospel Lesson for Good Friday. As is traditional, it is the entire account in that Gospel of the trial, crucifixion and entombment of Jesus. The length of the scripture lesson does not commend itself to preaching. It does work well, however, as a series of lessons that can be divided (as indicated below) for reading without comment. If it is your desire to preach at your church's Good Friday service, I would suggest choosing one of the divided passages below for that purpose. I have supplied commentary on the entire account from John under the divisions I would propose, so that you may either use a given section for preaching or the entirety of the lessons for a Tenebrae or "Lessons and Prayers" service

The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus: John 18:1-11. The narrative of Jesus' trial and crucifixion begins with the Master's betrayal and arrest. After setting the stage, the narrator tells us "Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons" (18:3).

This passage actually tells us a great deal about the body that came to arrest Jesus – and what it tells us is integral to the remainder of the story. First, it tells us that they are led by Judas – the one who Jesus earlier predicted would betray him.

Second, it tells us there was “a detachment of soldiers together with police”. However, whereas the English translation is ambiguous at this point, the Greek is not. The Greek original tells us that the “soldiers” were a “*speiran*”. The word “*speiran*” is a technical term; it was only used in the first century A.D. for a Roman military unit of between two hundred and six hundred soldiers.

This is not a small band. Nor is it from the local constabulary. It is the Roman garrison in Jerusalem – because Pilate would likely not have had more than a single unit of *speiran* with him in Jerusalem. That means that the entire Roman military presence in Jerusalem had come to arrest Jesus! And they could not have come unless directed to do so by Pilate!

The term translated “police” is the Greek word *hyperatas*. That also is a technical term. It is the military body under the authority of the high priest who guarded the Temple.

What John is telling us by the technical terms he uses, therefore, is that an immense military force – somewhere between 300 and 800 soldiers – had come to arrest one man! And he is also telling us that these troops were both Roman and Judean. In other words, the political power of Rome and the religious authority of the Jewish clerical aristocracy were collaborating together to eliminate Jesus! In the Gospel of John, Pilate was not a by-stander or even a “Johnny-come-lately” to this plot to condemn Jesus to death. John wants us to understand that Pilate is an integral part of the plot to eliminate Jesus. In fact, the *speiran* could not be there without Pilate’s explicit order. The politics of oppression and the religion of control were already working closely together to eliminate this significant threat to the dominating power of these systems.

So an impressive military force came to arrest a solitary man. Obviously the question John wants us to ask is, “Of what were Pilate and the chief priests so afraid that they had to send such a large force?”

That which made them so afraid is revealed in the next sentence of the text. “Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, “I am he”, they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.” This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me”” (12:4-9).

First, note that once this army of 300 to 800 armed men arrives in front of Jesus, they do nothing. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, Judas does not come forward and betray Jesus with a kiss. They simply stop, dumfounded before Jesus. And it is Jesus who must initiate the action to arrest, not they.

Second, it tells us, “when Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground” (18:6). This strange statement is again peculiar to John, and does not appear in the Synoptics. The response of this military force of 300 to 800 men to Jesus’ words is to “be decked” as if hit by a powerful fist. It is not saying that they took a step backward, but that they were physically knocked off their feet by the power of Jesus’ word. *That* was what they were so frightened about! They were profoundly intimidated by the power and the truth of Jesus’ words that exposed them and the political, economic and religious systems they represented for what they really were. In other words, the power of the “Word made flesh”, “who was in the beginning with God” and who “was God” – that one was so powerful, *he could put an army on its backside!* *That* is the power of the Word of truth and exposure that we are to proclaim to the world and its systems.

Finally, the story of Jesus’ arrest ends with Peter’s pathetic action (18:10-11). It tells us that Peter cuts off the right ear of one of the soldiers, Malchus, who is there to arrest Jesus. And Jesus intervenes, rebuking Peter with the words, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” (18:11) God’s kingdom will not be won by Jesus’ disciples imitating the dominating power of the systems. Acting like Rome or the Judeans will not win the world to God’s Kingdom. Conversely, it will be a sign that the systems have won, for they will have seduced God’s people to act like them. Only continuing to act as the beloved community, nonviolently resisting the systems and using our relational power to call them to accountability and to responsible action will move society toward becoming the world which God loved and for which he died!

Jesus and Peter on Trail Before the Judeans (18:12-27). There are two trials of Jesus that John presents. The first trial is before the Judeans (18:12-27); the second is before the Roman authorities (18:28—19:16). Likewise, the trial before the Judeans is also cast as a double trial: the trial of Jesus before Annas, the former high priest and father-in-law of his successor, Caiaphas (18:12-14, 19-24) and the trial of Peter (18:15-18, 25-27). The two Judean trials of both Jesus and Peter are artfully intertwined by John in the narrative.

John is concerned about presenting the marked contrast between the trials of Jesus and Peter. Jesus’ trial is held in the palace of Annas – the “power behind the throne”. Peter’s trial is held in the courtyard of that palace, to which Peter gained access through another disciple. The interrogator of Jesus is Annas – the former high priest. The interrogator of Peter includes a woman, a slave and temple police. Jesus is interrogated both about his teachings and his disciples. Peter is interrogated about his relationship with Jesus. Jesus responds boldly and even confrontationally – an unheard of “facing-down” of the high-priest emeritus. Peter denies even knowing Jesus. Jesus ends his trial as the proud, unbowed winner. Peter ends his trial as the broken loser. The two trials are a very artful presentation of marked contrasts between the two men – the lack of faith in God and commitment to their cause and the community on the part of Peter, the strength, surety and commanding presence on the part of Jesus who turns the tables on his prosecutor and places him on trial.

There are several other important points presented by John. First, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, the Judean trial is before Annas – not the Sanhedrin, chaired by Caiaphas. There is no mention

of others gathered for the hearing. The text tells us “they took (Jesus) to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year” (18:13). And then later it states “Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest” (18:29). Nothing is reported of Jesus’ hearing before Caiaphas – only that before Annas.

Second, it implies that the hearing before Annas occurred at night (since the cock crowed in 18:27) and the hearing before Caiaphas in the early morning. That made the interrogation before Annas illegal, because trial was to occur only in daylight and only before a body of judges – in this case, the Sanhedrin – legally constituted to hear the case.

Jesus makes note of the illegality of the trial by saying to Annas, “I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret” (18:20). Jesus is, in essence, saying to Annas, “I have spoken openly; you have not. I have taught in public; you have conspired in private. I have said nothing in secret; everything you do to dominate and make profit off the people you do in secret. And this illegal trial is just another example of how deceitful and manipulative you actually are!” No wonder the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying “Is that how you answer the high priest” (18:22b)?

But the high priest has been exposed. And Jesus refuses to back off his confrontive position. He answers the policeman, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to it. If I have spoken rightly (implied, “which of course, both you and I know I have”), why do you strike me?” The text doesn’t record Annas’ emotions at this moment of exposure, but he must have been livid with rage as he realized he had just been exposed and rebuked by his prisoner. Somehow, he knew not how, he had been placed on trial by that prisoner and he had been found guilty! What a powerful scene – and such an awesome and sophisticated use of power on Jesus’ part.

Jesus on Trial Before Rome (18:28-38a). The trial now shifts to the direct meeting between Pilate and Jesus. Pilate intends it to be his interrogation of Jesus. Jesus turns it around to be Pilate’s interrogation.

It begins with Jesus standing before Pilate, and Pilate asking, “Are you the king of the Jews” (18:33)? To catch the nuance of this statement, the emphasis must be on the word “you”. “Is it **you** who are the king of the Jews?” To Pilate, there is only one “king of the Jews” – the puppet ruler, Herod. He is astounded that the Jewish ecclesiastical/political/economic elite have brought this rag-tag peasant before him on trial for treason against Rome. Is this the man that Pilate was asked to commit his Jerusalem troops, his *speiran* to capture? But he is only a peasant! Have the Judean leaders taken leave of their senses to be intimidated by such a no-body?

Jesus responds to Pilate’s sarcastic (and perhaps incredulous) comment with a statement that makes the procurator realize this is a more worthy opponent than he originally surmised. “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me” (18:34)?

Part of Rome’s capacity to govern the world effectively was the myth about itself it had intentionally disseminated to its subjects. That myth was of the objectivity of Rome as the great lawgiver of the world. They had taught that Rome’s unimpeachable authority stood far above

the fray of local petty politics. Rome had convinced those under its authority that it was the body chosen by the gods (or God) to provide objective, unprejudiced adjudication and stability to the world. If there were no Rome, there would only be chaos with every nation doing what was right in its own eyes.

Jesus shatters that myth of unimpeachable authority with these few words. In this sentence, Jesus reveals to Pilate that he knows that the troops sent to arrest him were Pilate's troops, and rather than Rome being the objective, unbiased power it pretended to be, in reality it was an integral part of the Judean plot to eliminate him. In essence, he is saying to the procurator, "Pilate, don't play games with me. I know you and Rome are as much a part of the conspiracy to eliminate me and neutralize my movement as the priests of Judea are. Your hands are as covered with blood as are theirs." Jesus exposes Rome for the manipulative, dominating power it truly is, locked in a continuing embrace with the local political, economic and religious systems and leaders who will serve Rome's interests in maintaining control over the people, and in economically exploiting and politically oppressing them. Nothing has gotten by Jesus!

Pilate, astounded, seeks to distance himself and Rome from the Judean leaders. "I am not a Jew, am I?" he rhetorically asks (18:35). "Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" But his attempt to evade Jesus' exposure of him by trying to redirect blame doesn't work. Jesus, instead, moves to the heart of the issue.

"My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (18:36).

This is one of the most misinterpreted passages in John. It is usually interpreted as saying that Jesus' kingdom is a heavenly kingdom, not an earthly kingdom and therefore the angels would not defend him when he is killed by the earthly authorities. However, that interpretation makes no sense in the light of the context of this passage – which is the conflict between the Roman-Jewish conspiracy ("Pilate's World") and Jesus' jubilee community ("Jesus' World"). Nor is it consistent with John's use of the word "world" throughout the Gospel (e.g., 1:9-29; 14:17-31; 15:18-19; 17:6-25), where it is normally used to refer to the Judean/Roman political, economic and religious systems.

What Jesus is actually saying in this response to Pilate is, "My kingdom is not made up of the values, structures and people of society's political, economic and religious systems which seek to oppress, exploit and dominate society to secure their own wealth, power and position. If my kingdom were this kind of society, committed to dominate and control the people, then of course my followers would rise up in revolt and seek to overthrow you by force. But it is not that kind of kingdom. It is a kingdom totally outside your capacity to understand, because you understand power only as being unilateral and dominating, and you do not understand the power of relational love in community. So you and I, Pilate, come from two entirely different kingdoms, two entirely different worlds."

Pilate is confused, exasperated, and clearly out of his league. This conversation began with Jesus on trial. And now, Jesus has so skillfully and deftly turned the tables that Pilate finds himself

defending himself and seeking to justify his actions to his prisoner! What had happened? How is it that he, and the Rome he represents, finds itself on trial before this Jewish peasant? So all Pilate can do is return to his old argument: “So you are a king” (18:37a)?

Jesus isn't through with Pilate yet! He replies, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (18:37b). In other words, what Jesus says to Pilate is this: “If you want to use the metaphor of “king” to understand who I am, that's all right with me. But I'm much more than that. I am here – even now, Pilate and on trial before you – to testify to the truth. I am one who reveals the world as God intended it to be and to call people like yourself to use your influence to return society to God's intentions. That was why I was born. That is why I am here. And anyone who responds to this message and receives God's intentions for our life together is a part of this new kingdom – this beloved community of truth!”

Pilate responds with his now famous line, peculiar only to the Gospel of John. “What is truth” (18:38)? He simply does not understand that Truth, embodied in this peasant Jesus whom he so despises and fears, is standing in front of him!

Pilate's moment of salvation, his opportunity both as a human being and as a high government official to embrace an entirely different way for himself and society passes him by. The door is shut, the conversation is over. And Pilate is found guilty!

The Divine Man and the Collusion of the Powers (18:38b—19:16). The trial of Jesus now enters its final stage. Pilate is both intimidated and awed by Jesus. He has to find a way out of an impossible situation, for this man may seem crazy to him but certainly does not deserve to die. Pilate concludes that the way out is to interpret the issue as a religious squabble between the Judean leaders and Jesus, not worthy of Roman intervention, never mind execution. So he now begins to negotiate for Jesus' release while finding a way to mollify the Jewish leadership.

His first attempt is to remind those seeking Jesus' crucifixion of the custom that he releases a prisoner at Passover (18:39-40). He selects the worst of them all – a bandit named Barabbas. The Greek word for “bandit” doesn't mean a thief. It is the word for a violent political terrorist. Intriguingly, the name “Barabbas” means “son of the father.” Which “son of the father” will they choose? The Judean leadership chooses Barabbas, likely to Pilate's utter surprise.

Foiled at his first attempt, Pilate tries another tack. He has Jesus severely whipped, then holds a mock coronation, and with a crown of thorns and a purple robe, has his soldiers bow the knee to him and mockingly declare him king of Israel. Perhaps this apparent humiliation of Jesus will bring about a change of heart in the Jewish leaders. But it does not. They cry out, “Crucify him! Crucify him” (19:6a)! In anger, Pilate says, “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him” (19:6b).

For the first time, the Jewish leaders state their real motivation as clearly as they can: “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God” (19:7). It is not simply that Jesus claims to be the Messiah, they are saying. It is that he is making himself equal with God – and that, no human can do.

Of course, Pilate hears the words “Son of God” from his own perspective, not theirs. We tend to think that the Romans and the Jewish leaders would have a common use of language and common concepts lying behind that language. But that was not the case. For the Judeans to accuse Jesus of seeing himself as “Son of God” meant that he was likening himself to God, in essence setting himself as an idol in God’s stead – obviously a heresy. But to Pilate, that title meant something quite different – and the Judean leaders knew that!

To a Roman, the words “Son of God” meant a “divine man” – and the only one of whom any Roman would dare to claim as a “divine man” was Caesar himself! Suddenly, the entire issue in regards to Jesus has been escalated by the high priest and leaders to an entirely different level. They have redefined the issue. How is that?

The crime of which Jesus was initially accused by the priesthood and brought before Pilate was treason against the state – that he was setting himself as the “Messiah” or God’s choice to be king of Israel, responsible for freeing Israel from Roman dominance. Now they have redefined Jesus’ crime in a way that could not be ignored by a Roman official. To a Roman, if this man is indeed a “Son of God”, then he has been chosen by the gods to succeed the present Caesar of Rome. This man is claiming to be the true Caesar, and by that declaration, declaring the present Caesar an imposter. No wonder the text declares, “Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever” (19:8). Indeed!

Whatever decision he made, Pilate suddenly realized, he could end up not only on the wrong side but also in danger of losing his life! If Jesus were indeed a divine man, nothing would stop his overthrow of Caesar because the gods had ordained it so. But if he were only a charlatan and Pilate supported him, then the procurator’s career would be finished and his life forfeit, for his duty was to defend the power and position of the current Caesar. What should Pilate do?

Pilate took Jesus into his private quarters to consult with him. “Where are you from?” he asked (19:9). In other words, “Who are you, anyway? How is it that you come from God?” Jesus gives no answer. Pilate, both alarmed and frustrated, demands, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you” (19:10)?

Jesus responds, “You would have no power over me unless it has been given to you from above” (19:11). In other words, Jesus declares, “Any power you think you have is a power that has actually been given you by God, not by Caesar. For I am also Barabbas – the Son of the Father. And it is my Father – not Caesar – who gives you any power that you might possess!”

Now Pilate knows! This is the Son of the Father, a “divine man” (in Roman thinking). He will someday conquer Caesar! Now Pilate must make a decision. Does he release Jesus? Or does he defend Caesar?

He returns to the Jewish leadership with his third – and most forceful – attempt to free this “Son of the Father”. He tells the Jewish elite that he will release Jesus. He has played his trump card!

And now they play theirs! “If you release this man,” they respond to him, “you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor” (19:12)!

The issue has now been clearly drawn. Pilate must choose between Jesus and Caesar. His hope was to release Jesus, and then let the “gods” bring him to Roman power, if that were indeed their design. But Pilate will not now have the luxury to take such an obtuse route. He must either declare himself for the kingship of Jesus or the kingship of Caesar. Which “divine man” will he choose? Now Pilate is truly on trial! If he chooses Jesus and lets him go, he now knows the Jewish leaders will report this act of treason to the emperor himself – and Pilate will lose his head! He chooses the emperor.

Bringing Jesus out to the judgment seat, Pilate makes one final feeble attempt. “Here is your king”, he declares (19:13). The Judean leadership responds, “Away with him! Crucify him” (19:15)! Pilate retorts, “Shall I crucify your king?” Then the Judeans leaders shout out their most damning words: “We have no king but the emperor” (19:15)! Those who have been commanded by Yahweh to have no other authority ahead of him (Exod. 20:3) choose the Roman emperor as their highest authority. Those who have been given the responsibility of leading the people of Israel in the worship of God now give their worship (allegiance) to Caesar. The words Yahweh spoke to the great prophet and judge Samuel more than a thousand years earlier now reaches its apex of fulfillment, “they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over Israel” (I Samuel 8:7b).

“So Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be crucified” (19:16)!

Here in chapters 18 and 19, John demonstrates to the reader the depth of the collusion of the Powers. The Jewish powers – the high priest, the priesthood, the Sadducees and the Pharisees – have been committed to the execution of Jesus at least since John 11:49 – if not even earlier (John 8:59). But to protect their power and their credibility in the eyes of the people, it was necessary for the Jewish leaders to have Rome execute Jesus as a traitor and revolutionary.

The Jerusalem Clergy Aristocracy could have stoned Jesus to death as a heretic and blasphemer – and even considered that possibility (8:59). But they recognized that to take that route would be to make themselves exceedingly vulnerable before the people (see below). So they needed to have Rome execute Jesus by crucifixion as a traitor and revolutionary. In that way, they both eliminated Jesus and didn’t risk rejection by the people. But in order to do that, they had to gain the cooperation of Rome.

Their target for gaining such collusion was the one Roman who could order Jesus’ crucifixion as an enemy of the state – the Roman procurator over Palestine, Pilate. They got his cooperation by sufficiently alarming him about Jesus that he dispatched his troops to arrest him. They hadn’t figured on Jesus turning the tables at his trial, so that Pilate would end up being on trial. So the Jewish aristocracy had to force Pilate to comply with their wishes. Though the Judeans were brutal in their threats to the procurator, Pilate finally concurred. Consequently, both the oppressive power of Rome and the exploitive power of the Judean aristocracy, covered with the controlling veneer of the Jewish religious system, acted together to destroy “the Son of the Father” – the Man, Jesus of Nazareth (19:5). This story is the clear telling of the abuse of power

of the political, economic and religious systems in collusion to apparently destroy even the intentions of God!

It is particularly important to note in John *the role the people do not play* here. Whereas in Matthew 27:20 and Mark 15:11, it is the “crowd” along with the “chief priests” and “elders”, and in Luke 23:13, it is the “people” along with the “chief priests” and “rulers” who shout at Pilate’s gate for the crucifixion of Jesus, in the Gospel of John there is no mention of a crowd at all! There are screaming hoards in the Synoptic Gospel; they are conspicuously absent in John.

What is described in John is *not* the city of Jerusalem gathered together to demand the crucifixion of Jesus; there is no public rejection of Jesus. Instead, what is described in John is a private hearing – a small band of the highest of Israel’s religious, political and economic elite (that is, the high priests and the chief priesthood) meeting privately with Pilate to negotiate Jesus’ crucifixion.

The leadership of Israel and the chief representative of Rome are meeting together – the Judeans as supplicants and the Roman as permission-giver – to come to a mutual agreement (even if it is entered into reluctantly by Pilate) on the crucifixion of Jesus. The first inkling the Jewish people had of what was happening to Jesus was the *fait accompli* of his hanging on the cross. There is not even a “Via Dolorosa” in the Johannine narrative to alert the people to the plot of the Powers against Jesus, for the text simply tells us that Jesus carried “the cross by himself”, implying secrecy in getting him to Golgotha (19:17).

That is why it is so unfortunate that, in so many English translations of the Gospel of John, the Greek word “*Judaos*” is translated “Jews” rather than “Judeans”. That is so, because its translation as “Jews” implies “the Jewish nation” or the “Jewish people”, and it therefore becomes easy to accuse the Jewish people of being “Christ-killers”. But they were not! In fact, by-and-large, in the Gospel of John, they are supportive of Jesus. And they were deceived by their own rulers. Jesus’ enemies were not “the Jews” but “the Judeans” – the political, economic and religious elite of Israel working in close collusion together to control the nation for their own political power and economic benefit. And the writer of the Gospel of John is very careful to make that distinction from the Prologue all the way through Jesus’ betrayal, trial, crucifixion and burial!

Jesus’ Crucifixion as the Liberation of Humanity (19:16-42). John now moves into the crucifixion scene (19:16-37) and Jesus’ burial (vss. 38-42). That story is uniquely nuanced by John with ever-so-subtle differences between it and the same account in the Synoptic Gospels. But those differences exist in order to carry the weight of the unique theology of John’s Gospel.

Consider the differences between the crucifixion accounts in the Gospels of Mark and John, for example. In Mark, Simon of Cyrene helps carry the cross; in John, Jesus carries it alone. In Mark, the bystanders, chief priests, scribes and even those crucified with him mock and reproach Jesus. None of that happens in John. In John, attention is paid to the title over his head – and it’s called a title, not an inscription. John pays attention to the division of Jesus’ outer garment and the seamless inner garment, noting that its distribution fulfilled scripture. In Mark, Jesus’ last words are “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In John, Jesus’ last words are

“It is completed”. In John, Jesus surrenders his spirit and allows himself to die; not so in Mark. In John, therefore, Jesus is in control of his own crucifixion.

John also notes that the chief priests, rather than the soldiers, have Jesus handed over to them for crucifixion (vs. 16). However, the Roman soldiers are also there (vs. 23). Thus, the complicity of both Rome and the Jewish aristocracy continues to the very end.

It is intriguing to note that John uses the Greek word for “title” to refer to the inscription above Jesus’ head, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”. The term “title” is specifically used for kings, particularly at their enthronement. In a profound sense, John sees Jesus’ crucifixion, not as a defeat, but as his enthronement.

Dying on the cross, Jesus even takes the time and is in control sufficiently to make arrangements for the continued care of his mother by his beloved disciple.

Finally, before he can “complete” scripture, Jesus must do one more thing. He states his thirst and is given vinegar to drink, thus intentionally fulfilling Psalm 69.

The text then tells us that he declares, “It (i.e., his work, his mission) is completed”, and “he hands over his spirit” to God (vs. 30). Thus, Jesus is not killed by the Jewish and Roman systems. He chooses to die! He chooses his moment of death, just as he chose the method. The Judeans haven’t won; for Jesus could have been rescued if he so chose (18:36). His enthronement has now occurred at the cross, for the cross is to John the symbol of Jesus’ victory, not his defeat!

Why did Jesus die? And in what way can we say his death was not defeat, but enthronement? It is in John 19:31-42, after the story of Jesus’ death is recorded, that John makes explanation for that death. John tells us that his death “occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, ‘None of his bones shall be broken’” (19:36). And again, John states, “They will look on the one whom they have pierced” (19:36-37). The first reference comes from two Hebrew Bible passages – Exodus 12:46 and Psalm 34:20. The first passage is about the Passover Lamb, sacrificed for the sins of the people, stating “You shall not take any of the animal outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones”. Psalm 34:20 is about the Righteous One who receives the afflictions of his people, and whose flesh is eaten as a sacrament or holy ordinance that brings healing to the people.

The second scripture is quoted from Zechariah 12:10. This passage is within the context of the victory of God’s people over the “shepherds” of Israel’s systems who are only concerned about “devouring the flock of the (people)” in their lust for power and greed. There will be one who will stand against these leaders of Judah, Zechariah declares, and these leaders will dispose of him because of the threat he poses to their power. When they do so, however, “the inhabitants of Jerusalem” will look upon the one “they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn” (Zech. 12:10b).

What John does here, therefore, is to both interpret Jesus’ death as a sacrifice and liberation of humanity, an act of atonement (the Pascal Lamb). And he places the motivation of the death as

clearly the leaders of Israel's systems and the Romans (who did the "piercing" – John 19:34) who conspired together to rid the nation of the man whose death would become redemptive and liberating to the people oppressed by those systems. In other words, John is saying that the political, economic and religious systems of Judah and Rome, in ridding themselves of the man who was such a threat to them, set into motion a movement that would remain a "thorn in their side" until both structures had been overthrown and removed from the world. They had set into motion the events that would ultimately destroy them when they sought to destroy Jesus!

Finally, the text tells us that two prominent and wealthy figures – Joseph of Arimathea (who is introduced for the first time) and Nicodemus (the member of the Sanhedrin who appeared twice before in John) assume responsibility for Jesus' burial. The text tells us that Joseph is "a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Judeans" (19:38). That same fear is true of Nicodemus, as we already know from John 3. But the two men assume the task of arranging Jesus' burial, doing so hastily and quietly in order not to draw attention to their actions. They bury Jesus quietly and then disappear from the pages of history, never to be heard of again.

These two wealthy and powerful men, secret followers of the Christ, are given credit for burying Jesus. But they do not witness the resurrection! And why? Because they are people who, although attracted to Jesus and his teaching, are primarily committed to conforming to the Judean's expectations of them – submitting to their power and influence, and are thus unwilling to publicly commit themselves to Christ! Their status in society, their wealth and their power are of greater importance to them than their commitment to Christ and his kingdom. They have chosen Caesar rather than God. And so, although they are remembered kindly by the church, they are rejected from being a part of the power of Christ's resurrection, and therefore of Christ's community committed to turning the world upside down!¹

Isaiah 52:13—53:12 is the fourth, last and longest of the "Servant Songs" of Isaiah (42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13—53:12). It is also the most difficult because of its distinctive theology of vicarious suffering and because of the way it has been embraced by Christian biblical scholarship and theology as descriptive (and even predictive) of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The text itself is ambiguous as to whether the servant is Israel, a faithful remnant of Israel or an individual. In some passages, it seems to be referring to an entire nation, in others to a representative portion of that nation, and in others, it is clearly referring to one person. In the servant passage in Isaiah 42, what Isaiah tells us about the servant are three things. First, the servant will be about "bringing forth justice" both for the poor (vs. 7) and in the nations (vss. 1, 6). Second, he will accomplish this, not through being a victor and conqueror who defeats unjust nations, but by suffering and perseverance (vss. 2-4). Third, the omnipotent God chooses this

¹ This exegesis of John 18:1—19:42 owes much to the biblical research done by the following authors: Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 2 (NY: Doubleday, 1970); Peter Ellis, *The Genius of John: A Composition-Critical Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984), Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Gospel of John: Meaning, Mystery and Community* (Minn.: Fortress, 1994); Paul B. Minear, *John: The Martyr's Gospel* (NY: Pilgrim Press, 1984).

servant (vss. 1, 5) and will transform society through him by doing a new thing (vss. 6-9). This is both the life and the vocation of the servant.

Much of Isaiah 49 and 50 return to the servant theme. In these chapters (49:1-6; 50:4-5), the identity of the servant is ambiguous. In 49:3, it is clearly identified with Israel (“You are my servant, Israel”). But in 49:5-12 and in 50:4-6, he is clearly not Israel but an individual who is acting upon Israel to bring it back to God and to restore the survivors in Babylonian captivity back to the land. So, although the servant is someone who is linked closely with Israel, he is not Israel itself or even a representative Israel – but clearly an individual within that nation.

What is particularly moving, however, is the scope of the servant’s activity and therefore the scope of Yahweh’s redemptive work. The servant has been chosen and called forth by God, not only to draw Israel out of captivity and back to Yahweh (49:5-6). That is “too light a thing”. He is to draw “the nations” to Yahweh, so that God’s salvation is to “reach to the ends of the earth”. Yahweh’s salvation is not meant for Israel alone, but for the entire world. The shalom community is intended for all the nations on earth. All humanity is meant to live under God in a relational culture, practicing justice and equitable distribution of wealth. And the means God will use to transform the whole world will be one person – God’s “servant” who is “deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers” (49:7). God will use the least to reach the most, the servant to reach rulers, the rejected to transform all humanity (vs. 7b). And the way the servant will bring society to God will be by suffering, by absorbing insults, and by giving “my back to those who struck me” (50:4-6).

The description of the redemptive work of the servant reaches its climax in Isaiah 52:13—53:12. The author of Isaiah 53 knows how shocking and depressing his description of the treatment the servant will receive is going to be. So, to set the stage, he writes in the introduction to that servant song the reminder that, although the servant’s treatment will be unbelievably harsh (52:14), he will “prosper”, “be exalted and lifted up” by God so that “kings shall shut their mouths” and stand in awe and obedience to him (vss. 13, 15). He will conquer death and will be vindicated, so that humanity and even national systems will be transformed because of his restoration and vitality!

Isaiah 53 is the crowning passage of the servant songs, and the most profound and penetrating commentary on the servant. Chapter 53 tells us that, although the servant grew up in relationship with God, he was not attractive or a compelling figure. Rather, “he was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account” (53:3).

Then comes the most remarkable portion of chapter 53 – verses four through six. They are remarkable both because it is theologically so innovative in the light of the Jewish theology of that day and also so profound. For it states that the servant has made substitutionary atonement for us (vs. 5), “and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (vs. 6). With those words, the author is using the metaphor of the Jewish Law’s concept of the Scapegoat, upon whom the sins of the people are annually laid, thus bringing about their redemption (Lev. 16:8-26). But here it is used, not of an animal but of a human being – the servant of the Lord – who will make

atonement for the community-destroying sins of domination, oppression and exploitation, not only of Israel, but also of the entire world.

Finally, the passage ends with triumph – just as it began with triumph in 52:13-15. Isaiah writes, “Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (53:12).

Psalm 22 is all about obedience to God’s call. It is the description of how one who is faithful to Yahweh has to bear the consequences of such faithfulness. And that ultimate consequence is death!

It was Psalm 22:1 that was quoted by Jesus from the cross (Matthew 27:46). But many biblical scholars believe that he actually quoted the entire psalm rather than just its opening lines. The reason why that possibility is suggested is that it is *the* classical prophecy of the suffering and execution of God’s suffering servant, his “Son of Man”, the Messiah.

It begins with a powerful cry for help directed to God. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest” (22:1-2).

It is a very poignant and powerful cry of distress. The servant feels utterly abandoned by God and rejected by humanity. It therefore captures the very essence of the pain of those who would follow Yahweh in utter obedience – but most eloquently of all, the Son of Man (Messiah).

Consider how this psalm describes one who is truly being rejected and sacrificed by his people. Consider these well-known passages selected from Psalm 22.

“All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me; they shake their heads. ‘Commit your cause to the Lord, let him deliver – let him rescue the one in whom he delights’” (vss. 7-8).

“Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from birth, and since my mother bore me, you have been my God” (vss. 9-10).

“I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast” (vss. 14-15).

“I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me, they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots” (vss. 17-18).

“I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (vs. 22).

“For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him” (vs. 24).

“To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him! Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it” (vss. 29-31).

Hebrews 4:14-16 and 5:7-9 is the closely reasoned argument by this unknown Christian author that examines what it was about Jesus’ death that made it redemptive. He does this in two ways. The first way is his argument from the Hebrew Bible that Jesus was appointed by God to be the world’s high priest. The second argument is built around the character of the mysterious priest-king, Melchizedek.

In his first argument that Jesus is the world’s high priest, the author of Hebrews states, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12). This verse is often used in regards to scripture. However, the context makes it clear that “the word of God” is the living voice of God as it comes through Jesus (4:13-16). It is Christ who is “living and active” in the hearts and souls of his chosen, giving them both discernment and wisdom so that they might perceive and act upon God’s call upon their lives and to work for his kingdom.

In this passage, Jesus is likened to both the high priest of Judaism and the unblemished lamb sacrificed by that priest for the forgiveness of sins (4:14-16). Thus, the writer is using Temple worship as his symbol for the work Jesus has done for us. The high priest provides for us “mercy and grace” because he “approaches the throne of grace with boldness” (that is, the throne between the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies). The sacrificial lamb is the symbol of atonement for our sins. Thus, both lamb and high priest express the work Christ has done for us from the “throne” of his cross! Note that the author of Hebrews is following closely the argument of John who saw Jesus’ death, not as defeat but as enthronement. The work he is doing on the cross is a powerful priestly work in which the one doing the sacrificing (the priest) and the sacrifice itself (the lamb) are one and the same!

In chapter five, the author makes his shift from Jesus as high priest to Jesus as a priest like Melchizedek. The author of Hebrews begins by quoting Psalm 2:7 (“You are my Son, today I have begotten you”) and 110:4 (“You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek”). The introduction of the figure of Melchizedek is crucial to the author’s argument.

Melchizedek is mentioned only in Genesis 14:18-20 and Psalm 110 in the Hebrew Bible, and only in Hebrews (5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 10-11, 15, 17) in the New Testament. He was the king of Salem (the predecessor city to Jerusalem) in Genesis as well as a “priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18b). His importance is emphasized by the fact that Abram (later, changed to Abraham) submits himself to the authority of Melchizedek and does obeisance – something Abram’s status requires of no other monarch he meets!

Why is Melchizedek so honored? Psalm 110 presents the argument that Melchizedek is both the ideal king who is superior even to David, and the ideal priest who mediates directly between God's people and God (I Kings 8; Ps. 132:9-10). That priesthood is eternal (Ps. 110:4a), and therefore transcends both the Aaronic and Levitical priesthoods. Being both the king of justice and of shalom and as an eternal priest, Melchizedek is the best "type" of the Son of God – whose royal, holy, high priesthood transcends all other political, economic and religious orders!

That is precisely the argument the author of Hebrews builds in this passage. Jesus, that author argues, is God's eternal high priest as typified by Melchizedek. Jesus is the divine king greater than David, God's son who, by being God's son, is qualified both to be the high priest who makes the sacrifice for sin and at the same time the sacrifice itself that will atone for the sins of Israel and of the world.

But how does Jesus make atonement for the world's sins? He does so, Hebrews states, through his suffering. He prayed fervently for deliverance from death (cf. John 20:27) because, as an authentic human being, he no more sought death than any of us would. He "offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears" (5:7). His prayer was answered by God, not by his avoiding of death but through his resurrection from the dead!

The author of Hebrews then moves on to an intriguing wordplay with which he identifies the redemptive element in Christ's sacrificial death. He writes, "Although he was a Son, Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered" (5:8). The Greek word translated "learned" is *emathen* and the word "suffered" is *epathen*. Jesus *learned* obedience (because his natural inclination as a human being was to survive, he had to *learn* to obey God's call to him against all logic and survival instincts) cancelled the disobedience of Adam (who represents the entire human race, Rom. 5:19) and thus qualifies Jesus to act as God's eternal high priest (Heb. 2:17; 4:15). It was his obedience (cf. John 12) that actually brought about the atonement of humanity because, through that learned obedience, he fulfilled God's redemptive plan for humanity. Thus, "he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (5:9) by being in his actions and obedience, "a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (vs. 10). That was the significance of what Jesus did when he decided to "stay the course" in John 18-19.

Hebrews 10:16-25 begins by quoting Jeremiah the prophet. "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds; I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more" (10:16-17). By quoting Jeremiah 31:33-34, the author of Hebrews asserts that God has fulfilled his promise, made through that prophet as well as others (like Isaiah) that Jesus' sacrificial, substitutionary death makes further sacrifice both unnecessary and superfluous.

But what should Jesus' sacrificial death mean for the way we "live and move and have our being" as God's children in a resistant and God-denying world? In the light of this reality, the writer of Hebrews states, let us both receive and enthusiastically embrace what God has done for us and for the world through Jesus Christ (vss. 19-22). Let us hold fast to the *faith* we have received from him, let us maintain our *hope* that God's intentions for the world will be carried out, and let us live in *love* for one another, building God's community in a resistant world (vss.

22-24). In this way, let us keep on “encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day (i.e., God’s Kingdom) approaching” (vs. 25).

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