

The Wages of Sin

Matthew 27:1-14

“The wages of sin is death.” Romans 6:23. That’s a pretty familiar verse defining a very clear and consistent biblical principle. What you earn, what you deserve, on account of your sins, is the punishment and condemnation of death. That principle goes all the way back to the creation of the world, when God said to Adam and Eve,

Gen. 2:15 "Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Moses would later warn the people of Israel with these words, this plain warning,

Ex. 32:23 “But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out.”

Ezekiel the prophet makes this declaration ink

Ezek. 18:20 “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.”

Much more generally, Paul writes this,

Gal. 6:7 “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.”

Never, perhaps, has that principle been more evident and obvious than with Judas. One of the 12, the original disciples of Jesus, the of whom Jesus had declared, “He will betray me.” And

he did.

Mat. 26:47 “And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and elders of the people. 48 Now His betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him.” 49 Immediately he went up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed Him.”

Betrayed with that sign of a kiss, the sign of friendship and loyalty, a sign Judas used with such evil intent, a betrayal which would cost him his life—not only life eternal but life here and now. “The wages of sin is death.”

Judas isn’t alone, however, in his betrayal of Jesus, nor in his guilt, though we see in him the most tangible and obvious consequences of sin in Judas’ suicidal despair. Before we look at that more specifically, note the fullness of,

I. AN EVIL CONSPIRACY.

Collusion. Sedition. Treason. With multiple participants.

v.1-2

We will begin with,

A. The evil plot and guilt of the Jewish leaders.

“The chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death.” Notice Matthew’s point that it was a “plot”, not a trial. Commentator William Hendriksen writes this, “The question might be asked, ‘But why have a trial at all, since the Sanhedrin had decided a long time ago that Jesus must be put to death, an agreement which very recently had been reconfirmed?’ Answer: the verdict must be made official and reasons must be formulated, so that the sentence that subsequently will be based upon it can be justified before the Jews, and so that the indispensable co-operation of the Gentiles

—especially of Pilate—can be obtained...In reality, the entire trial was a farce. It was a mis-trial. There was no intention at all of giving Jesus a fair hearing in order that it might be discovered, in strict conformity with the laws of evidence, whether or not the charges against him were just or unfounded. In the annals of jurisprudence no travesty of justice ever took place that was more shocking than this one...The Jewish leaders just could not “take” it that they were beginning to lose their hold upon the people and that Jesus of Nazareth had denounced and exposed them publicly. They were filled with rage because the new prophet had laid bare their hidden motives, and had called the temple court from which they derived much of their profit a den of thieves. On the surface, the dignified chief priests, elders, and scribes might try to put on an act by the seeming imperviousness of their demeanor; underneath they were vengefully nettled, convulsively agitated. They were thirsting for blood! Hence, this is not a trial but a plot, and the entire plot is their own. They devised it, and they see to it that it is carried out...Hence, this in reality is no trial at all. It is murder.”

As I read last week, the words of the prophet Isaiah certainly come to mind,

Is. 53:3 “He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him...7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. 8 He was taken from prison and from judgment, And who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken. 9 And they made His grave with the wicked—But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth.”

Let me note something at this point that is emphasized later on in the New Testament, namely that the Jewish leaders represent the whole of the nation. So it can rightly be said that, as a whole, the Jews killed Jesus, the nation of Israel bears the guilt of Jesus’ crucifixion. And thus on the Day of Pentecost, when the preaching of the gospel went to all the nations of the world, not just to Israel, Peter’s powerful conclusion to his sermon included these words,

Acts 2:36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

Not long after that we read again of Peter’s preaching,

Acts 4:8 “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: 9 If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, 10 let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. 11 This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

There is a point to all of that, namely that the nation of Israel would no longer be considered the nation of God’s people. That title, that identification of “the people of God” now belongs to the church, to us, to us who believe in Jesus. And so Israel as a nation would be judged, condemned as a nation, cut off from the tree which represents the people of God. There would be a remnant would be saved, through faith in Jesus, but as a whole as a nation, we read this of Israel,

Rom. 11:7 “What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks;

but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. 8 Just as it is written: “God has given them a spirit of stupor, Eyes that they should not see And ears that they should not hear, To this very day.” 9 And David says: “Let their table become a snare and a trap, A stumbling block and a recompense to them. 10 Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, And bow down their back always.”

So I am not saying anything that would be agreement with modern day anti-semitism, which espouses a genuine hatred of and political antagonism toward that modern nation. Rather, I would say this, the Old Covenant nation of Israel was judged and cut off, because of their rejection of Jesus. And that nation, as a whole nation, would cease to exist, as it did in AD 70 when it was destroyed by the Roman army. They are no longer the covenant people of God, justly condemned for this evil plot against Jesus the messiah.

But they weren't along in this evil conspiracy. The Jewish leaders were joined together with the civil authorities of the Roman Empire, represented by the person of Pontius Pilate. And so we see,

B. The evil complicity and guilt of the Roman governor.
v.11-13

Notice how the conversation went, beginning with that focused question which was asked by Pilate, not doubt to identify the false charge against Jesus of sedition—his claim to be king. So the question is simply, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Do you claim to be king? He knew, of course, that was the accusation the Jews were making of him, claiming something that would be blasphemous to them. But to Pilate, it would represent the danger of sedition, for Caesar was the Roman king! So Pilate

must have thought this was a rather clever way to identify the offense Jesus had created. “Are you the King of the Jews?”

We can't miss the irony, of course, because we know and understand that the words are true, Jesus is the King, the promised Messiah, the anointed one in the line of David. But we understand that claim to be a reference to his spiritual kingdom, to his rule as the messiah who would lay down his life as the atoning sacrifice for his sheep, rather than to some claim to the promotion of a military insurrection. So Jesus was accused of being a king by the evil complicity of the Roman Governor Pilate, and he answers so simply, “It is as you say.”

Jesus' silence continues,
v.12

John's gospel gives us further details, including Jesus' own definition of his kingdom,

John 18:33 "Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” 34 Jesus answered him, “Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?” 35 Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?” 36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.”

That prompted Pilate's further question,

John 18:37 Pilate therefore said to Him, “Are You a king then?” Jesus answered, “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” 38 Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?” And

when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, “I find no fault in Him at all.”

There really is nothing new in that, as John also records in, John 12:44 Then Jesus cried out and said, “He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me. 45 And he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me. 46 I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness. 47 And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. 48 He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. 49 For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. 50 And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak.”

But Pilate doesn’t believe any of that, and his question reveals his own evil complicity, even though Jesus gave him no reason to find fault with him.

v.13-14

As we will see in the rest of this chapter, Pilate doesn’t escape the guilt of his own cowardly and faithfulness rule as governor, and Jesus, of course, will be condemned to death by that Roman authority. It was an evil conspiracy in every way. Then, going back to Judas, we see,

II. THE GRIEVOUS CONSEQUENCES OF SIN.

We see the effects of sin upon the heart and soul of Judas. And they are grievous! This is what sin does to the human soul, created in the image of God. It destroys the soul. And I should emphasize, I am referring to sin without repentance. Hardened

sin. Rebellious sin. Stubborn and persistent sin. So I don’t want to confuse these grievous consequences of sin with the promise and hope of the gospel which promises forgiveness to those who, by faith, truly trust in Jesus. Judas has no such faith. Only,

A. Guilty remorse and regret.

v.3

Interesting words here, Greek words that must be defined by the context. Note first the sense of condemnation. Jesus knew and understood that he had been condemned. That is the context. Judas is not here seeking forgiveness. He is not here turning from his sin. There is no godly sorrow in grieving his sin, crying out for forgiveness. Surely he had heard Jesus’ invitations to forgiveness throughout the 3 years he had spent with Jesus. Surely he would have things like this,

Mat. 11:28 “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

What we read in our text is simply the recognition of condemnation. And that was the context for his remorse. This Greek word can sometimes be translated to refer to the true turning of repentance, but here it just means remorse. Guilty remorse. Guilty regret. He’s not turning away from his sinful betrayal of Jesus, he is just lamenting the condemnation he deserves. He got no pleasure from his sin. He couldn’t even enjoy those 30 pieces of silver. So rather than turning in faith to Jesus, confessing his sin, he was left with nothing but guilt. Condemnation. And in that guilt,

B. Guilty anguish.

When our catechism talks about the fall into sin, it refers to the estate of sin and misery, and it is so helpful to join those two things together—sin and misery. Not sin and pleasure, as the world promises. Not sin and enjoyment, not sin and prosperity. Sin and misery. And Judas embodies that misery, that despair. He had nothing left, and not even his co-conspirators could offer any consolation, for they had no further need of him.

v.3-4

There is a very important distinction to be made here, and a distinction to be clearly understood, for the very heart of the gospel is at stake. The difference is between the genuine experience of repentance, an experience of a true believer, and the contrasting experience of the anguish of guilt by one who remains dead in his sin and subject to the just condemnation of a holy God. That distinction is made so clear in,

2 Cor. 7:8 “For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. 9 Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. 10 For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.”

Paul speaks of godly sorrow, sorrow that leads to repentance. We can call that a broken heart, a contrite heart. Our confession of faith calls it “repentance unto life.” Paul’s words I just read, “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted.”

That godly sorrow is defined well by David’s words in, Ps. 51:16 “For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise.”

Similarly,

Psalms 34:18 “The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit.”

Also, Is. 57:5 “For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

But this is something very different, this experience of Judas. From 2 Cor. 7, “the sorrow of the world produces death.” The guilty anguish of Judas produces no faith nor repentance, only guilty anguish, and with that,

C. Helpless despair.

v.5

He took his own life, so great was his despair. So thorough was his sense of condemnation, so unwilling was he to humble himself in godly sorrow before the Lord whom he betrayed that all that remained for him was to take his own life.

We read further of this tragic event in,

Acts 1:15 “And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said, 16 “Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by

the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; 17 for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry.” 18 (Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out. 19 And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem; so that field is called in their own language, Akel Dama, that is, Field of Blood.). 20 “For it is written in the Book of Psalms: Let his dwelling place be desolate, And let no one live in it”; and, Let another take his office.”

Beloved, Satan is a liar, because he promises a reward and benefit to your sin. The truth is that the wages of sin is death. The truth is that sin, no matter what it might promise you, sin brings about guilty remorse and regret, guilty anguish, and helpless despair.

We should go back then to Judas’ co-conspirators, to see their hardness of heart. Their sin brought about a,

D. Hypocritical self-righteousness. v.6-8

So now they are concerned about the law! Now they are concerned about propriety and holiness. They can’t take blood money into the temple treasury! The blatant hypocrisy hardly needs to be explained, for they had conspired with Judas to have Jesus condemned to death. They had paid him that money! But they couldn’t put the money back into the treasury.

Mat. 23:27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Finally, as a fitting conclusion to all of this, let me emphasize that all of this comes to pass as,

E. Prophetic fulfillment. v.9-10

So God had prophesied Judas’ betrayal. Indeed, it was a necessary element of the plan of salvation God had designed, the suffering and death of his own, innocent and sinless son. God prophesied this sinful wicked act of this condemned traitor. God determined the certainty of all these events “according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.” Yet God is not the author of this sin, Judas is. God is not the morally responsible agent of this sin, Judas is.

And in perfect consistency with that, it comes to pass exactly as God had decreed, exactly as God had prophesied, as Matthew quotes from Zechariah 11 along with reference to various prophecies of Jeremiah, whom he mentions by name. Again, as William Hendriksen puts it, “We are safe, therefore, in allowing the words “through the prophet Jeremiah” to stand, just so we realize that the background of the passage is actually both Jeremiah and Zechariah, and that the first part of the quotation resembles a passage from Zechariah even more strongly than any from Jeremiah. The main point to bear in mind, however, is that also in the suicide of the traitor and the purchase of a field with his blood money prophecy is again being fulfilled, and God’s plan is being carried out.”

As we end, let me conclude by turning away from Judas and his condemnation to the hope of the gospel to which I have already referred.

2 Cor. 7:10 “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world

produces death.”

So it is that,

Psalm 34:18 “The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit.”