

## THE CROSS OF CHRIST 3-12-17

### *Why Jesus Died*

It was around this time, the Lenten season, thirteen years ago when people across our country poured into theatres to see a movie, a movie they knew would not be enjoyable, a movie recounting a story they had heard before, and yet they went to find out for themselves what all the hubbub is about, and to establish their own opinion of the Mel Gibson production on the death of Jesus. How many of you saw it then or have seen it since? I found myself at the end of the movie wanting to lead the theatre in singing *When I Survey the wondrous cross, on which the prince of glory died*. And I found myself wanting to tell people all about the rest of the story. I did neither one because I am either very polite, or I'm a chicken. I don't know which. *The Passion of the Christ* was a two-hour movie about an eighteen-hour period in the three year ministry of the 33 year-long life of the incarnation of the eternal God. It could hardly be faulted for not telling the whole story. In fact, the greatest contribution of the movie may be in raising the questions that it did raise. And the biggest question has to be "Why?" Why did Jesus endure what Jesus endured? Was there something more to it than the petty jealousy of some Jewish leaders and the hideous barbarism of some Roman soldiers? Why did He die? Our curiosity may seek satisfaction on these points, but normally an irritated curiosity is the only consequence of our ignorance about the cause of someone's death. When we come to the death of Jesus however, things are quite different. For here our souls demand, our souls need to know why the Son of God died.

From a purely historical perspective, from that of an unbeliever, the reason for Christ's death is found somewhere outside of himself. And the facts seem to them as plain as day. Jesus did not "die" so much as he was killed, publicly executed as a criminal. The doctrines he taught were felt to be dangerous, even subversive. The Jewish leaders were incensed by his attitude toward their law and by his provocative claims concerning Himself, while the Romans heard that He was calling Himself a King and challenging the authority of Caesar. To both groups Jesus was a threat and so they determined to do away with him. In fact, they entered an unholy alliance to do so. In the Jewish court a theological charge was brought against Him. In the Roman court the charge was political. In either case, the solution to the problem was the same. He must die. So the surface level answer to our question of why is that he was executed as a law-breaker, and or a martyr for his cause. Let's look now at the role of three parties blamed or credited with the crucifixion.

First, we consider the Romans. Those immediately responsible for the death of Jesus were the Roman soldiers who carried out the sentence. The details of what they actually did to kill Jesus are not mentioned in the Biblical record. The gospels say simply, "They crucified Him." Several years back I read a novel entitled, *The Robe*. It was a fascinating read, a work of fiction about one of the soldiers assigned this horrible task of crucifying the Lord, and then winning, in a lottery, his robe. You may remember from the gospels that a centurion standing near the cross was given eyes to see, and said as Jesus died, "Surely this man was the son of God." The gospel writers seem essentially indifferent to the soldiers who did the actual crucifying. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." But the case is quite different with the Roman governor who ordered the crucifixion. Mark 15:**15** *Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.* Pilate was guilty. In fact, his guilt is written into our creed isn't it? *Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate.* Pilate was appointed governor of Judea by Tiberias and served from AD 26-36. His overriding aim was to maintain law and order, to keep those troublesome Jews from getting out of hand. And it certainly would alarm him when the leaders of the Jews come to him with a man claiming that he teaches against paying taxes and claims himself to be a king. Pilate could not fail to take notice. As his investigation proceeded, the gospel writers emphasize two important points.

First, Pilate was convinced of the innocence of Jesus. He was convinced of the innocence of Jesus. He was obviously impressed by the prisoner's noble bearing, His self-control and His political harmlessness. So three times he declared publicly that he could find no ground for charging him. After the opening battery of accusations Luke 23:**4** *Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man."* The second time after Jesus returned from seeing Herod Luke 23:**13-15** *Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people, 14 and said to them, "You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him. 15 "No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him."* The third time, after they shouted, "Crucify Him" **22** *He said to them the third time, "Why, what evil has this man done? I have found in Him no guilt demanding death; therefore I will punish Him and release Him."* In truth, Pilate saw thru the plot of the Jews from the very beginning. Matthew 27:**18** *He knew that because of envy they had handed Him over.* And what's more the governor's personal convictions were affirmed by his wife **19** *While*

*he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message, saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him."* So Pilate knew. He didn't know Jesus was the son of God but he knew he was no criminal. Yet he killed him.

The second thing emphasized about Pilate was his effort to avoid having to make a decision about killing Jesus. First, he tried to pass him off to another judge, to Herod, but Herod just sent him back unsentenced. Then Pilate offered a halfway measure. He is innocent, but I'll punish him. He hoped that might satisfy the Jews. Thirdly, he tried to release him thru a special provision of Roman law. And fourthly, and finally, when he ran out of options, and decided to let the Jews have what they wanted he sought to wash his hands of the whole affair. Matthew 27:24 *When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves."* In doing this, Pilate became the poster boy, not for tyrannical maliciousness, but for political cowardice. It was not Pilate's verdict that won out. It was their shouts, their demand, their will – to these Pilate capitulated. Mark 15:15 says Pilate was, *wishing to satisfy the crowd*. Pilate represents for us every rotten politician who puts preservation of self over principle, who puts career ahead of justice. And Lord knows they abound in our day. We have legislators who know nothing about voting their conscience but who are experts at discerning what sells, at knowing what will keep them in power. But no matter what the issue is, whether it is abortion or the economy or war, or whatever, a politician cannot appeal to popular opinion for how he votes. Every civil leader is answerable to God, not his constituents, not the pressure groups. The vast majority don't understand that. Pilate didn't understand that. And on judgment day he will face again this One whom he condemned and it will be Pilate who stands guilty and doomed.

Pilate gets the negative mention in the apostles creed, but the Scriptural weight of blame for the unjust treatment of Jesus lies elsewhere. In John 19, Jesus says this to Pilate John 19:11b *He who delivered me up to you has the greater sin*. Perhaps, since he used the singular there, the Lord is referring to Caiaphas the high priest, but the entirety of the Jewish leadership is implicated. Indeed, so were the people. Listen to the bold words of Peter in Acts 2:22-23 *Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know--23 this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. Acts 3:14-15 you disowned the Holy and Righteous*

*One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. I Thessalonians 2:**14b-16** You also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, 15 who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, 16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.*

If you recall back thirteen years ago, when Gibson's movie was released, there was a controversy having to do with the supposed anti-semitism it promoted – a charge which can only be described as ridiculous. If that movie was anti-semitic then we can never portray evil again by a person of any race. The fact is that the gospel narratives upon which the movie was based were all written by Jews, about essentially Jewish history and the hero of the story, like some of the bad guys, was Himself a Jew. Could some evil people twist the gospel story into an excuse to hurt Jews? Sure, and some have done just that, but that hardly changes the facts of history. It is hardly deniable that, in the New Testament, the blame for the crucifixion is laid at the feet of the Jewish people. It is. And you know what? They accepted it willingly. Look at Matthew 27. When Pilate said, "His blood be on your hands" Matthew 27:**25** *All the people said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!"* Talk about cursing your own nation and your own descendants! Listen to what Jesus had said not long before this. Matthew 23:**31-35a** *So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. 33 "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? 34 "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, 35 so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.* This powerful word was said to the Jewish people. Did the Jews kill Jesus? Sure they did. And they did it with lies and intrigue. John 18:**29-30** *Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man? 30 They answered and said to him, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you."* That's as if to say, "Hey, don't worry about the charge. If he weren't guilty of something serious we wouldn't be accusing him would we? You just condemn him like we ask." But when they saw that Pilate's court needed a

charge they started making things up. Luke 23:2 *They began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King."* Now all that is a combination of truth and falsehood isn't it? To say he claimed to be a King is true, to say that He was misleading the nation was an opinion, and the claim that He opposed paying taxes was an outright lie.

The guilt of the Jews is clear, but why did they do this? What motivated this inestimable wickedness? We already saw that one thing was envy. They envied the popularity and power and even the righteousness of Jesus. Another thing was fear. They feared losing the esteem of the people. After all, Jesus was saying some very cutting things about them. They also feared losing their position with the Romans. The high-priest and his party had some clout with the Romans. If they could keep things in Jerusalem under control they would enjoy the perks of Roman favor. A radical, a possible rebel like Jesus, was a threat to the status quo. C.S. Lewis called Jesus a *transcendental interferer*, and so He remains. We resent His intrusions into our private lives, His undermining of our self-will and self-rule. We too, often wish Him gone and when we do we side with the Jewish crowd that shouted, "Crucify Him." But alas, we weren't there to shout. But the Jews spoke for many nations while they damned their own in seeking the death of Jesus.

There is still a third party blamable for what happened to Jesus. He is the man of Kerioth. We call him Judas - Iscariot. In a way, Judas is the least guilty of the three because Judas didn't sentence him to die, or lie to get him killed, or even **want** Jesus dead. Judas seemed sorrowful and regretful when he realized what the result of his betrayal would be. So, in a way, his guilt doesn't rank with Pilates, and certainly not with the Jews, except that Judas, far more than the others, was acting against light and love and knowledge. Judas was apparently just after an easy buck. We presume he had decided to abandon the Jesus movement and decided to pad his pockets on the way out. His role was to lead the Jewish officers to Jesus in the night. This was strategic because they were afraid to apprehend the Master during the day when many could behold their treachery. They needed insider information about where to find Him at night and this Judas sold them for thirty pieces of silver which bought him a miserable death and a place of historical infamy. Mark 14:21 *The Son of Man is to go just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.* Some have wanted to pity Judas because he was a pawn in the hands of Satan who filled him to do his wickedness. But what he did he did willingly and Jesus doesn't mind condemning him. "Woe to him!" the Lord says. And

in the end even Judas condemned himself. He acknowledged his crime in betraying innocent blood, returned the money for which he had sold Jesus and committed suicide. There was no repentance in Judas but there was overwhelming remorse over his guilt in the murder of Jesus.

So then, we have looked at three parties on whom the gospel writers fasten the major blame for the crucifixion: the Romans led by Pilate, the Jews led by Caiaphas and Judas. Yet there are two more parties still to be mentioned. Whom else is responsible? What about you? Have you, like Pilate, sacrificed Jesus for your career, your own advancement, your own felt need to keep the peace? Have you, like the Jews, sacrificed Jesus in order to keep your own self-righteousness, your own pride, your own reputation? Have you, like Judas, sacrificed the Lord for money? The old hymn asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" And we must answer, "Yes, we were there." Not as spectators, but as participants, plotting, scheming, bargaining and yelling, "Crucify Him!" We may try to wash our hands of it like Pilate but our attempt will be as futile as his. We are one with Adam in his guilt, and we are one with Pilate and Caiaphas and Judas in their guilt. We must see the death of Jesus not only as something done **for** us but as something done **by** us. Peter Green writes, "*Only the man prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross may claim his share in its grace.*" Horatius Bonar wrote, "*T'was I that shed the sacred blood; I nailed him to the tree' I crucified the son of God; I joined the mockery. Of all that shouting multitude I feel that I am one, and in the din of voices rude I recognize my own.*" So, my friend, add your name to the list of those who killed the son of God.

But despair not. There is a deeper, richer reality still of which we have not yet spoken. For the greater truth is this – that, in spite of our effort and our guilt, neither we, nor Judas, nor the Jews, nor Pilate really killed Jesus. We are guilty of His murder, for that is what we sought but we did not take His life. In fact, no one could do that. Jesus had to and Jesus did lay it down. Galatians 2:**20** *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.* Ephesians 5:**2abc** *Walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us.* Ephesians 5:**25** *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.* Isaiah 53 says the Messiah will pour out His life. And when we look carefully at the crucifixion narratives we see that is exactly what happened. Crucifixion usually took more than a day to kill its victim. The footrest attached to the cross enabled the victim to push himself up to avoid suffocating, but, since the Jewish Sabbath was coming, the Romans decided to cut the

suffering of Jesus short, finish him off, by removing the footrest and letting him suffocate. They wanted to get him buried. To their surprise, when they went to hurry along his death, they discovered that he was already dead. Why? John 19:30 *When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.* Jesus is the Lord of life. He holds the keys of death. To die he had to borrow mortality from us. Therefore, nobody else has ever died like this. And if the point still isn't clear - look at John 10:17-18 *For this reason the Father loves Me, because **I lay down My life** so that I may take it again. 18 "**No one** has taken it away from Me, but **I lay it down on My own initiative.** I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.* That's just an incredible statement! Who but Jesus could say this? If He isn't divine He's a fool. If He is not the Son of God He deserved to die. He speaks of death like it's his personal yo-yo to let down or pull up. Jesus did not kill Himself but He did plan, prepare and orchestrate all that took place at his death. He told his disciples exactly what would happen. We can give honor to the great martyrs of God - to John the Baptist and Stephen and Polycarp and John Hus - these men were faithful to the death. They were not willing to deny Christ to save their lives but they were otherwise helpless before their killers. Jesus was never helpless. Look at Matthew 26. The scene is at night. Judas has led to Jesus his captors, betrayed him with a kiss and then Peter wants to fight, but Jesus says this to him 53-54 *Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?54 How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?* Wow! Jesus was following a plan, a script, worked out in eternity with his heavenly Father. Peter understood this, and prayed in Acts 4:27-28 *Truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever **Your** hand and **Your** purpose predestined to occur.* The Jews conspired to kill Jesus out of hate, but the greater conspiracy was a conspiracy of love between the Father and the Son who devised this awesome plan for the redemption of lost sinners. The New Testament not only says the Son laid down his life, it says the Father gave him up. Romans 8:32 *He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?* For God so loved the world that he gave His son. Octavius Winslow summed it up when he asked, "*Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas for money, not Pilate for fear, not the Jews for envy, but the Father for love!*"

Jesus chose to die. Following the Father's plan, He embraced death. Gladly? I don't know. The third verse of the hymn *How Great Thou Art* speaks of Jesus on the cross bearing the burden of our sin "gladly." I have to tell you I'm not sure that is an apt word. Willingly He died - yes. Lovingly - yes. Gladly? Possibly the most moving portion of the trip to Israel Beth and I took twenty years ago was our time in the Garden of Gethsemane - just contemplating what our Lord endured there was overwhelming. In Luke 22, the garden account, we don't see a lot of gladness in Jesus as He nears the cross. We see agony. You'll remember he said, "*Father, if there is any way, remove this cup, this calling of death away from me.*" And when He realized there was no other way, He began sweating blood over what awaited Him and over the struggle in His soul. No man has ever faced agony like this and He did it because He was committed to two things: the Father's will and your salvation. Had there been some other way than a substitutionary death for the Father to redeem an elect people you know He would have allowed it for Jesus, don't you? Don't you? But there was no other way and so Jesus went to the cross for you and for me. There, He died so that we might live. There, He took the punishment for sin that is due everyone who tramples on God's law. And if your heart is open to Him, by His wounds you may surely be healed. ---Prayer: *If you can say you truly believe in this Jesus, but you have never embraced His offer of forgiveness and new life, then you may do so right now. He paid the price that you could not. All you must do is admit your need, confess your faith, and be healed by His wounds. Do that now as you make the words of my mouth the cry of your heart.*