

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW
AN OLD PLAN TO SHAPE NEW LIVES
(6) PREPARING FOR CONFLICT

Matthew 26:3-27:66

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April 9, 2017

SCRIPTURE

²“You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” ³Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, ⁴and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. ⁵But they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

¹⁴Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, “What will you give me if I betray him to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him. ¹⁷On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?” ¹⁸He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.’” ¹⁹So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.”

²⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” ³⁰When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ³⁶Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” ³⁹And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him

was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.” ⁴⁹At once he came up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him. ⁵⁰Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you are here to do.” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him (Matthew 26:2-5, 14-19, 26-30, 36-39, 47-50 NRSV).

¹When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. ²They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor. ¹¹Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.” ¹²But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. ¹³Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?” ¹⁴But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

²⁴So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.” ²⁵Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” ²⁶So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. ²⁷Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. ²⁸They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ³⁰They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

⁴⁵From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ⁴⁷When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” ⁴⁸At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” ⁵⁰Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks

were split.

⁵⁷When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth ⁶⁰and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away (Matthew 27: 1-2, 11-14, 24-31, 45-51, 57-60 NRSV).

MESSAGE

The Book of Joshua is the sixth book of the Bible. The first six books of the Bible are known as the Hexateuch. Hexateuch is a Greek term meaning “six books.” The Hexateuch consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua.

The six sections of Matthew seem to correspond to the six books of the Hexateuch. They are like life stages. Genesis represents conception. Exodus represents birth. Leviticus represents childhood. Numbers represents adolescence. And Deuteronomy represents adulthood or maturity. If we connect Joshua to this then Joshua represents vocation. Joshua is a book of action. It’s theme is, “Let’s go!”

The Book of Joshua details how the Israelites conquered Canaan – the Promised Land given by God to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. The book opens with Joshua being commissioned by the Lord as the leader of the Israelites. It tells of his conflicts with the Canaanite kings. It tells of his victories over them and how he allotted the land of Canaan among the tribes of Israel. The book ends with Joshua encouraging the people to remain faithful to the Lord. In summary, the book is filled with actions dealing with conflict, victory, and the responsibilities that come with peace.

The sixth section of the Gospel of Matthew is like the Book of Joshua. It is filled with action – so much so that we will take three Sundays to cover it. And even then we will only scratch the surface. Just as in Joshua, here in the sixth section of Matthew you have conflict, victory, and the implications or responsibilities as a result of victory. Today we will be examining the conflict.

¹When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples,
²“You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified” (26:1-2) .

Each of the previous sections has ended with the stock phrase, “Now when Jesus had

finished saying these things” or the like. But something is added here – the word “all.” Jesus’ teaching ministry has come to an end. From now on his focus will be on his impending suffering.

But Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is not a helpless victim of circumstances. Rather he stresses that Jesus’ fate was the fulfilment of God’s purpose set out in Scripture. This was enacted in many ways including through a ceremonial meal we call the Last Supper.

This commemorative meal Jesus established grew out of the Passover, the chief annual festival of the Old Testament. Passover commemorates the final plague on Egypt when the firstborn of the Egyptians died and the Israelites were “passed over” or spared because of the blood smeared on their doorposts (Ex. 12:11, 21, 27, 43, 48). The Passover is also connected with the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 23:15; Deut. 16:16) because only unleavened bread was eaten during the seven days immediately following Passover (Ex. 12:15-20; 13:6-8; Deut. 16:3-8). Unleavened bread reflected the fact that the people had no time to put leaven in their bread before their hasty departure from Egypt.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus eagerly desired to eat the Passover with his disciples one last time before his death. The feast had to take place within the walls of the city. It was customary practice that if a person had a room available, they must allow use of it by any pilgrim who asked, in order that they might have a place to celebrate the Passover.

The disciples would have to get the food and prepare it. Items would include: lamb, bread, salt water, bitter herbs, a spicy fruit paste, and four cups of wine. Each item had symbolic meaning either representing the bitterness of bondage or the power and mercy of God.

Passover is the story of how God liberated his people. At the first Passover Feast in Egypt, the meal had been eaten standing (Ex 12:11). But thereafter, the tradition was to recline at table, because, in those days, only free people would lay on their sides to eat. (Slaves ate standing or, occasionally, while sitting down.)

But on the night of his last Passover supper with his disciples, Jesus took this principle of liberation a step further. He would now offer people freedom from an even more oppressive type of slavery: he would free people from sin and death. Subsequent generations would remember this every time they ate of the bread and drank of the cup from the meal Jesus had formed out of the Passover, the meal we call the Lord’s Supper.

The promise of the Passover is the promise of redemption as foreshadowed by the release of the Israelite slaves from Egyptian bondage (Ex 6:6). The promise of the Lord’s Supper is also the promise of redemption as fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16 NRSV).

The Passover commemorates a rescue that was undeserved. The Lord's Supper does the same. It is a theme that runs through both Testaments. Which brings us back to last week's parable of the sheep and goats (Matt 25:31-46). It would be wonderful if we were truly like the people described as sheep in the story – consistently and without ever having any ulterior motive, being gracious, kind and loving to one and all. But the truth is that does not describe us. In fact, we are all goats. And if you recall the story then you know the goats are in serious trouble. So I asked the question, "Is there any hope for goats?"

The final section of Matthew gives a resounding "Yes" to that question. It is the reason why Jesus suffered. It is the reason he went to the cross.

While suffering on the cross, Jesus made at least seven different utterances, commonly referred to as "The Seven Last Words." Matthew alludes to these (utterances from the cross) but the only one he quotes is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (27: 46). This haunting question reveals the depth of meaning behind the crucifixion.

It tells us that Jesus was nailed to a cross of sorrow. Crucifixion was the most painful and degrading form of capital punishment in the ancient world, and provoked the most distressing outbursts from the families of the victims, to say nothing of the horrendous toll it took on the victims themselves.

A person crucified in Jesus' day was first of all beaten with a whip consisting of leather straps with a piece of metal or bone attached to the end of each strap. Every lash would literally remove chunks of flesh from the back. This was designed to hasten death and some who were condemned never survived this terrible ordeal. After the beating, the victim was forced to bear the crossbeam to the place of execution. A tablet detailing the crime(s) was often placed around the criminal's neck and then fastened to the cross. At the site the prisoner was stripped and then tied or nailed to the crossbeam. The nail would be driven through the wrist rather than the palm, since the smaller bones of the hand could not support the weight of the body. In the ancient Near East the wrist was considered to be part of the hand. The beam with the body was then lifted and tied to the already affixed upright pole. Finally, the feet were tied or nailed to the post. The cross was not high off the ground (as it is often depicted in paintings and movies), and left the victim vulnerable to the abuses of animals and degenerates.

Religious women of Jerusalem prepared a wine and myrrh solution and offered it to those being executed to alleviate some of their pain (see Prov 31:6 -7). Soldiers offered vinegar

either to quench the thirst or, perhaps, just as a mockery.

Crucifixion generally killed by asphyxiation as it became harder and harder to pull one's frame up on the crossbeam in order to breathe. Death could also be caused by the loss of blood circulation or coronary failure. It could take days of hideous pain as the extremities turned slowly gangrenous. Sometimes the soldiers would break the victim's legs with a club in order to bring on a quicker death. Crucifixions were usually done in public places as a deterrent to criminal activity and political unrest, and by the first century (A.D.) were a common sight.

The fact that Jesus was nailed to a cross of sorrow expresses to us that Jesus knows the depth of human experience. He is described as "a man who suffered, who knew pain firsthand" (Isaiah 53:3 MSG). If Jesus was affected by normal human things such that he wept, got tired, thirsty, even angry; how much more would he be affected by this painful and completely unjust execution. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, tells us that Jesus emptied himself of his divine prerogatives in order to completely identify with our human experience (Phil 2:7-8). There is nothing in human experience that is strange to Jesus.

The fact that Jesus was nailed to a cross of sorrow also conveys to us that Jesus knows the darkness of estrangement. From about noon until three in the afternoon, the sky was dark. Prophets like Amos used the imagery of darkness to describe God's judgment upon those who should know better (Amos 8:9). But from Jesus' point of view it was a time of deep distress. His own question could be paraphrased, "Where are you God? Why have you left me?" Subsequently we now know Jesus hears and feels every cry of estrangement. There is great comfort in knowing that whatever we face in life, Jesus knows and understands.

We can also say that Jesus was nailed to a cross of sacrifice. He willingly laid down his life for us (John 15:13).

The Bible teaches us that human beings have a broken relationship with their Creator. This is the result of humanity's sinful rebellion against God. The consequence is spiritual and physical death and separation from God. The Old Covenant as instituted by Moses established animal sacrifice to communicate the seriousness of sin and the cost of repairing the damage.

"For the life of an animal is in the blood. I have provided the blood for you to make atonement for your lives on the Altar; it is the blood, the life, that makes atonement" (Lev 17:11 MSG).

Atonement is a kind of reconciliation, specifically, reconciliation to God made possible by a costly sacrifice which removes the effects of sin. The passion of Christ has made this reconciliation possible. The punishment for sin is separation from God. Jesus cried out:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Some thought he called for Elijah because the first part of Elijah's name means, "My God" and because Elijah was thought never to have died and could be called upon in times of trouble. But neither Elijah nor God intervened.

The physical and emotional suffering Jesus endured, as horrific as it was, paled in comparison to his spiritual suffering. The weight of sin was on him - sin so ugly in its unholiness that for one hellish interlude, in a manner of speaking, God the Father had to turn aside his gaze and his Son was alone. Abandoned. Forsaken. Forsaken for us.

Christ's atoning death is symbolized by the tearing of the curtain in the temple. The curtain mentioned is probably the one between the holy of holies—inhabited only by God—and the sanctuary where the priests ministered (Ex 26:33). That it was torn from top to bottom is a subtle detail indicating a divine rather than human act. Its removal signifies that the barrier between us and God has likewise been removed. Christ has opened the way to God.

This means Jesus was nailed to a cross of salvation. The work of the Cross was not an accident of history but part of the plan and purpose of God.

Jesus' haunting question, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?," is a quote from Psalm 22 - a psalm that begins in adversity but ends in victory, foreshadowing Jesus' work on the cross. Indeed, Jesus himself would later explain to his followers how the Hebrew Scriptures attest to the plan of God to deliver his people from the penalty and power of sin:

Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets said? Don't you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into his glory?" Then he started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him (Luke 24:25-27 MSG).

Salvation is the free gift of God to be received by faith in Jesus Christ. As the Bible says,

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him,

anyone can have a whole and lasting life” (John 3:16 MSG).

This is the message of the passion story. This is the meaning behind the conflict and suffering. This is why Jesus’ is our way of salvation.