

Holy Week as Recorded in the Gospels

Session #4: Trial, Crucifixion, and Burial

Today we will continue our walk with Jesus through his final week in the flesh beginning with the arrest and continuing through his burial.

“Messiah” Figures in New Testament Times

It is not unusual that the religious/political establishment might arrest and crucify a person claiming to be the Messiah. To a Jew it was matter of blasphemy; to the Romans, a matter of treason. Jesus was not the first, nor the last “messiah” to be killed by the authorities. Surprisingly, several others are even mentioned in the Bible:

1. John the Baptist – (beheaded by Herod Antipas, before 36 A.D. – see Matthew 14 and parallels; some thought he might be the Messiah – John 3:25-28)
2. Jesus of Nazareth – (crucified by Pontius Pilate, before 36 A.D.)
3. Theudas of Jordan – (mentioned in Acts 5:36, beheaded by the Romans between 44-46 A.D. He was to gather people at the Jordan River and stop the flow of water; the Romans killed all his followers.)
4. Judas the Galilean – (mentioned in Acts 5:37, had a zealot stronghold on a mountain called Gamala in Galilee, and was welcomed into Jerusalem with a Palm Sunday-like procession from the Mt. of Olives; the Romans killed him and all his followers between 46-48 A.D.)
5. “Messiah” from Alexandria in Egypt – (mentioned in Acts 21:38, the Romans killed all his followers, but the “messiah” escaped, around 59 A.D.; a Roman centurion asked Paul if he was this escapee)
6. Sicari – (a messianic prophet not mentioned in the New Testament; killed in a riot on the Mt. of Olives around 62 A.D.)

Jesus Before the Sanhedrin and Peter’s Denial (Mt 26:57-75; Mk 14:53-72; Lk 22:54-71; Jn 18:12-27)

Christians should not think that all the motives of the Jewish religious authorities were self-serving. There would be a natural mistrust of an untrained Galilean rabbi stealing the hearts of the masses. The Temple authorities and priests were largely Sadducees and part of Jerusalem’s wealthy aristocracy. They knew they were not as popular as the rabbis and Pharisees. The Roman officials only permitted the Sanhedrin to function on the condition that there be no uprising against Rome. If the crowds got out of hand, the issue wasn’t only that the Sanhedrin members would be out of a job – the country would also be out of a religious court system. This is probably the meaning of Caiaphas’ council that “one should die for the nation” (Jn 11:50). The families appointed by the Herodian kings (puppet kings beholden to Rome) to be High Priests were notoriously corrupt, including Annas (Hannan), and his son-in-law, Caiaphas. Many Jews felt that too much power was held by this one family. Interestingly enough, Annas owned the stalls for the money changers in the Temple, called “The Bazaars of Annas.” Certainly, he would not have given Jesus a warm reception!

Most scholars agree that the location of the Church of Peter in Gallicantu (the “cock’s crowing”) is the actual site of the estate of Caiaphas (Jn 18:15-27). Temple weights and measures bearing Caiaphas’ name found at the site is intriguing evidence, but the early veneration of the site as the location of Jesus’ interrogation and Peter’s denial lend credence to the claim of authenticity. Now covered by the church, it was an estate on three levels on the side of a hill. The top level was the living quarters. The next level included a courtyard (where Peter was warming himself) and the lowest level, stables and a cistern (which may have been used as a

holding cell for prisoners waiting to be judged by the high priest). Jesus would have had to be taken through the courtyard to the cell. Peter's denial very likely happened there. (Our group actually read the account of this event from scripture and prayed on the very courtyard, now a rustic chapel in the church.)

Note the differences in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' response to Caiaphas' question as to whether Jesus was the Christ (Mt 26:63-64; Mk 14:61-62; Lk 22:67-71; Jn 18:19-24). John is the only one that says Jesus was first taken to Annas.

The next day, the Council of the Sanhedrin met and condemned Jesus as a blasphemer who deserved death. They ridiculed and insulted him. Then they sent Jesus to Pilate because they had no authority to execute people without the blessing of the State (Romans). Also, if the blood of this popular rabbi were on their hands, they might become even more unpopular with the people.

The Death of Judas (Mt 27:3-10; Acts 1:18-19)

The only Gospel that tells of Judas' suicide is Matthew, however, Luke also tells a version in the first chapter of Acts (Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts). Judas regretted his betrayal of Jesus and tried to give back the thirty pieces of silver, but the religious authorities wouldn't take it. Therefore, Judas threw the coins down and went out and hanged himself (Matthew) or threw himself down so his guts spilled out (Luke/Acts). In Matthew, the authorities use the blood money (now defiled and couldn't go back into the Temple treasury) to purchase a piece of land for a potter's field- a burial place for foreigners (fulfilling a prophecy in Zechariah 11:13 and Jeremiah 18:1-4). Luke says Judas purchased the land himself, and then committed suicide on it – thus leading the plot of land to be called "The Field of Blood."

The Trial Before Pilate (Mt 27:11-14; Mk 15:2-5; Lk 23:2-5; Jn 18:28-38)

The Jewish leaders claimed that Jesus was plotting sedition against Rome, as "King of the Jews."

What do we know about Pontius Pilate (from Josephus, primarily)? He hated Jews and brought pagan gods into Judea. The Jews were humiliated on Pilate's first day in office. He stole the Temple treasury in order to build an aqueduct for the Roman section of Jerusalem. He violated the altar by sending in his military to kill people at the altar and have their blood mixed with the blood of the sacrifices. He mistreated Jesus, an innocent rabbi. Eventually, he overreacted to an uprising in Samaria and was dismissed by Rome. Sometimes we as Christians may be sympathetic to the Pilate, but we shouldn't be. He was much more ruthless than we usually like to think.

Jesus Before Herod (Lk 23:6-16)

According to Luke only, Pilate learned that Jesus was a Galilean. Therefore, to avoid being blamed and to curry favor with Herod Antipas, he passed the buck to him. Herod had authority over Galilee. Herod was in Jerusalem for the Passover. Herod, who had recently had Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, beheaded questioned Jesus out of curiosity. He mocked Jesus, dressed him in royal robes, and sent him back to Pilate.

The Sentence of Death (Mt 27:15-26; Mk 15:6-15; Lk 23:17-25; Jn 18:38b – 19:16)

There was a custom at Passover to release one prisoner to the people. Pilate offered the crowd a choice - Jesus or Barabbas. Barabbas was a revolutionary - or terrorist, in the eyes of the Romans. He probably was hero in they eyes of many Jews. The crowd chose Barabbas over Jesus. Interestingly, Matthew tells us

Barabbas had a first name – Jesus. Matthew also tells us that Pilate’s wife warned her husband not to have anything to do with “that righteous man,” having had a dream (a recurring theme in Matthew). The crowd not only called for Barabbas’ release, but for Jesus’ crucifixion. We must not put all the blame on the religious leaders, the “Jews,” the Romans, or anyone else for Jesus’ death. We, “the crowd,” are the ones who crucified Jesus (see the hymn, “Ah, Holy Jesus” UM Hymnal #289).

Pilate not only gave orders for the crucifixion, but also for a scourging. Scourging involved a whip with multiple strands, with metal or stone tips which would rip off the skin of the back and tear into the muscle. It is no wonder that Jesus wasn’t strong enough to carry his cross! Most people don’t survive a scourging. Pilate wanted to show the crowd what happens to Jewish “kings.” According to John, Pilate ordered a sign to be placed on the cross, which read: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” – in Latin, Aramaic (vernacular Hebrew), and Greek.

The Mocking and Road to Golgotha (Mt 27:27-32; Mk 15:16-21; Lk 23:26-32; Jn 19:16-17)

In cruel jest, the soldiers placed a scarlet robe on his back, a crown of thorns on his head, and a reed in his hand. They mocked him as the “King of the Jews.” Then they led him out to be crucified.

The course to Golgotha has been called the “Via de la Rosa” (“The Way of Suffering”). Jesus was forced to carry the cross-bar of his cross through the streets for the public execution. The synoptics tell of Simon of Cyrene (North Africa) who was compelled to carry the cross when Jesus could go no farther (he had already suffered a flogging). Luke has Jesus address the women who are grieving. There is a non-biblical tradition of a woman named Veronica who wiped Jesus’ face with a cloth (which became a holy relic). While not in the Bible, the woman is identified by tradition as the woman Jesus healed who had the issue of blood after she touched the hem of his garment (Luke 8:43–48).

The place of the crucifixion is somewhat debated. Several locations are speculated, but most scholars support the claim that The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built over the site of both Calvary (“Golgotha” = the place of the skull”) and the tomb. In the 19th century, a man named Charles Gordon who was visiting Jerusalem noticed a different area outside of the walls of the old city that included a outcropping of rocks that he thought resembled a skull, so he speculated it to be the location. The crucifixion is believed to have taken place outside the city walls – in keeping with the scriptures, the law required that the Passover lamb to be slaughtered outside the city walls – see Deut. 16:5-6 and Hebrews 13:12. However, there is no actual evidence that “Gordon’s Calvary” is the location, and the city walls in the 19th century were farther out from the ancient city than they were at the time of Jesus. There is also a “Garden Tomb” where tourists can visit that include a first century tomb some have claimed to be the location, but again, there is little evidence that this is correct. It is very picturesque and groups often visit the garden for prayer and Holy Communion. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher (which would have been outside the walls of New Testament Jerusalem) has been revered from the earliest centuries as the site, and there is no reason to question it’s claim. The shrine over the tomb has recently been renovated, and millions of the faithful visit the church to visit the chapel on the site of the crucifixion (where crosses have been excavated, and the tomb).

The Crucifixion and Death (Mt 27:33-44; Mk 15:22-32; Lk 23:33-43; Jn 19:18-37)

The only known archaeological confirmation of a crucified man was discovered in some tombs near Jerusalem in 1968. Scratch marks and breaks in the bones indicated that the man was probably crucified as pictured on the handout. Apparently, a spike went through both ankle bones. The nails for the arms were in

the wrists rather than the hands. Crucifixions were always in the nude, to further shame and disgrace the one being executed (John 19:23 implies this when it tells us that the soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothing).

The cross was probably made of olive wood (the discovered bones were attached to a piece of olive wood). Some believe that the upright of the cross may have been a rooted olive trunk, and the crossbar placed on the top of the trunk (forming a "Tau" cross – shaped like the Greek letter "T"). Olive trees are not very tall. If Jesus was crucified this way, he would have been much closer to the ground (and the spectators) than we usually imagine.

Most victims of crucifixion took a long time to die (that was kind of the point – to drag out the suffering). Jesus' death was relatively quick (if you can call six hours "quick" – from 9 a.m. till 3 p.m.) Jesus was ridiculed by the religious leaders while on the cross. Matthew and Mark say the two others crucified also reviled him. Only Luke tells us the story of the repentant thief on the cross. John tells us that Jesus entrusted his mother's care to "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Tradition says that John took Mary to Ephesus on the coast of what is now Turkey to live with him, the town that became something of a home base for the early church.

Darkness at the time of death is reported by three of the Gospels, but the tearing of the curtain in the temple is only reported by Luke – also see Hebrews 9:1-15 (esp. 12) and 10:19-22. (A Jewish source says that 40 years before the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., the door to the Holy of Holies was found ajar). A centurion who watched the crucifixion became a believer (Mt 27:54; Mk 15:39; Lk 23:47). Tradition says that his name was Longinus, that he and other soldiers at the cross left the Roman army and became missionaries in Cappadocia. Tradition says Longinus and the others were martyred for their faith.

The Burial of Jesus (Mt 27:57-61; Mk 15:42-47; Lk 23:50-56; Jn 19:38-42)

All four Gospels tell us that Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin and quiet follower of Jesus, asked Pilate for permission to take Jesus' body and bury it in his own family's tomb. Tombs were where bodies of family members were placed for a period of time until the flesh decomposed. They would be sealed so as not to be disturbed. Later, the bones would be retrieved and be placed in a stone box called an ossuary, with their name engraved on the box. The Sabbath would begin by sundown, so there was no time to properly prepare the body for burial (no "work" was permitted from Friday sundown through Saturday sundown). This is why the women (according to Mark and Luke) go to the tomb on Sunday morning at dawn to complete the task of caring for the body of Jesus.

John adds that another secret follower from the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus, accompanied Joseph, purchasing myrrh and aloes. This is the same Nicodemus who had sought Jesus out by night to whom Jesus had said "John 3:16." Together, John says they anoint and wrap Jesus' body.

The Guard at the Tomb (Mt 27:62-66)

Matthew tells us of how guards were placed at the tomb to prevent the body from being stolen by the disciples, lest they make the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead as he had promised. This sets up the commotion of the guards in Matthew's account of the Resurrection.