

Good Friday

Jesus on Trial: The Execution

Matthew 27:45-54

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Scripture

Six years ago, I began what I planned to be a seven-year series of messages. It is based on the book by James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken that is titled, *Jesus on Trial*.¹ My goal is to teach on seven important aspects of the trial of Jesus Christ: the diabolical *conspiracy* to kill him (which I covered six years ago); his night-time *arrest* in the Garden of Gethsemane (which I covered five years ago); the short *resistance* that the disciples mounted in his defense (which I covered four years ago); the *witnesses* who accused him of blasphemy during his ecclesiastical trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin (which I covered three years ago); the *verdict* reached in his civil trial by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (which I covered two years ago); the *sentence* of death that his enemies demanded (which I covered last year); and his *execution* by crucifixion (which I plan to cover this evening).

Jesus was led to the place of execution, carrying his cross according to Roman custom. He was crucified between two thieves who had also been sentenced to death. Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (John 19:19). Then the people and the religious leaders gathered around the cross of Jesus and began to mock him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:31-32).

But Jesus would not do that. His entire life’s mission was to seek and to save the lost. He had obeyed God’s law his entire life, and now he was about to suffer the wrath of God for sinners. And, if he were to come down from the cross, his mission to save sinners would fail. He *had* to die to make atonement for sinners.

¹ James Montgomery Boice & Philip Graham Ryken, *Jesus on Trial* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002).

The Bible states the execution of Jesus in Matthew 27:45-54:

⁴⁵ Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. ⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ⁴⁷ And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” ⁴⁸ And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” ⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, ⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:45-54)

Introduction

An *execution* is defined as follows: “The carrying out of a death sentence.”²

Review

If you had been privy to what was going on behind the scenes regarding the trial of Jesus, you would have been aware that it all began with a *conspiracy*. The religious leaders and the political leaders had conspired together to get rid of Jesus. But they were having great difficulty doing so because of Jesus’ immense popu-

² From Black’s *Law Dictionary*, quoted in James Montgomery Boice & Philip Graham Ryken, *Jesus on Trial* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 99.

larity with the people. However, a stunning development took place when one of Jesus' own inner circle of friends stepped forward to betray him to the authorities. Judas Iscariot volunteered to betray Jesus for some unknown reason.

Then, on the evening of 15 Nissan, 30 AD Jesus was *arrested* in the Garden of Gethsemane. A large band of soldiers had managed to arrest Jesus without too much trouble.

The brief *resistance* from Jesus' disciples did not amount to much. Jesus was quickly taken into custody, and a hasty trial was convened. Actually, there were two trials on the night of Jesus' arrest. The religious leaders tried to find a way to accuse Jesus of some offense of which he would be guilty, for as Mark said, "Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death" (Mark 14:55).

Most of the testimony presented at the ecclesiastical trial was vain testimony. Many bore false *witness* against Jesus, and their testimony did not agree (Mark 14:56). The high priest must have been beside himself because he could not get two witnesses to agree on their testimony. So, he did something that was entirely improper in a capital trial: he himself intervened. He asked Jesus if he was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed. Jesus said he was, and the Sanhedrin accused Jesus of blasphemy.

Because the Jewish Sanhedrin could not put someone to death, they therefore sent Jesus to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, for a civil trial.

But Pilate found nothing deserving death had been done by Jesus (Luke 23:15). In fact, he insisted, "I have found in him no guilt deserving death" (Luke 23:22). But the religious authorities persisted, and eventually Pilate's *verdict* was to deliver Jesus over to them to be crucified (John 19:16).

The *sentence* of death was given to Jesus because he claimed to be the Son of God. Both divine and human testimony was that Jesus was the Son of God. That would have been blasphemous, if it were not true. But, Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity; he is the Son of God. And for that he was sentenced to death.

Lesson

Tonight, I would like to examine several surprising signs that occurred when Jesus was executed and died.

I. **Darkness Over All the Land**

The first surprising sign that occurred when Jesus was executed and died was darkness over all the land.

Matthew 27:45 says, **“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.”** This was not an eclipse because an eclipse lasts only a few minutes. This was God causing darkness to fall over all the land from noon until three o’ clock in the afternoon. None of the Gospels tell us much of what happened during these three hours. However, it was during these three hours that Jesus, the Son of God, took upon himself the burden of our sins, was punished for them, and endured the wrath of his Father for our sins. The alienation of the Father was so great that at **about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** (27:46).

Boice and Ryken say, “The darkness thus veiled the anguish of the Son of God while he was bearing the punishment for our sins; it was not right for human eyes to look upon him in his suffering. At the same time, the darkness testified to the blackness of our sin and the tremendous cost to God of our redemption.”³

II. **The Curtain of the Temple Was Torn in Two**

The second surprising sign that occurred when Jesus was executed and died was that the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

³ James Montgomery Boice & Philip Graham Ryken, *Jesus on Trial* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 106.

Matthew 27:51a says, **“And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”** The curtain separated the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place in the temple. No one was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place behind the curtain except the high priest. And he could only do so once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The curtain being torn in two signified the removal of the separation between God and the people. All people now had access to God, not just the high priest, one day a year.

III. The Earthquake

The third surprising sign that occurred when Jesus was executed and died was that there was an earthquake.

Matthew 27:51b says, **“And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.”** Jerusalem sits on a major seismic rift, and so earthquakes were not uncommon. However, the timing of this earthquake, at the same time as Jesus’ death, indicated that something of universal significance was taking place. Jesus’ death had cosmic ramifications.

IV. Dead People Came Back to Life Again

The fourth surprising sign that occurred when Jesus was executed and died was that dead people came back to life again.

Matthew 27:52-53 say, **“The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.”** I am surprised that one does not hear more about this unusual sign. At the time of Jesus’ death, others, presumably Old Testament believers, were raised back to life again. Their resurrection must have caused a great stir in the city of Jerusalem. Their resurrection would have caused people to ask what had happened. And their resurrection was of course linked to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

V. The Centurion Confessed Jesus as the Son of God

And the fifth surprising sign that occurred when Jesus was executed and died was that the centurion confessed Jesus as the Son of God.

Matthew 27:54 says, **“When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’”** This is such an interesting and understated verse. The centurion was a witness to all that had happened to Jesus. He also was a witness to the surprising signs. And his conclusion about Jesus was this: **“Truly this was the Son of God!”** We don’t know if the centurion’s confession was a statement of genuine trust in God. Nevertheless, his statement is correct and is a necessary start for every genuine profession of faith. Jesus was – and is – the Son of God!

Conclusion

We are reminded again about what happened to Jesus during his final week in Jerusalem.

There was the diabolical *conspiracy* to kill him; his night-time *arrest* in the Garden of Gethsemane; the short *resistance* that the disciples mounted in his defense; the *witnesses* who accused him of blasphemy during his ecclesiastical trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin; the *verdict* reached in his civil trial by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate; the *sentence* of death that his enemies demanded; and his *execution* by crucifixion. During Jesus’ execution and death there were a number of surprising signs. And all of them bore testimony to the truth that Jesus was the Son of God.

So, this Good Friday, are you able to say with the centurion about Jesus Christ, **“Truly this was the Son of God!”**

You need to. It is the only way that anyone can be saved. Amen.

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and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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