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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 14: BETRAYAL, TRIAL, AND DEATH

The story of the betrayal, trial and execution of Jesus is covered in detail in the gospels, so in this unit we will primarily look at the most important aspects of these events.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The Betrayal

The gospels show that many of the Jewish religious leaders began to look for ways to do away with Jesus quite early in his ministry. Not only were they angry at Jesus for criticizing their personal religious hypocrisy, but also as more and more people began to follow the Galilean teacher the religious authorities grew increasingly concerned that widespread discontent and messianic expectations might cause the Romans to take away what limited self-government the Jews still had (as well as their own lucrative positions). So, by the final Passover festival in Jesus' ministry the chief priests were already actively looking for a way to arrest Jesus (John 11:53, 57). They dared not do so during the festival since they were afraid that people would riot (Mark 14:2), but when Judas Iscariot (see Note 1) went to them shortly before the Passover and offered to deliver Jesus to them, they were delighted and chose the night before the festival began to arrest him when no crowds would be present (Luke 22:6).

John's Gospel gives us a key insight into Judas' character in recording that he managed and stole from the money given to the disciples (John 12:6). This insight frames the whole story of his betrayal of Jesus, which appears to have been largely driven by a desire for money. Despite the fact that Jesus treated him as a friend, Judas is never shown as being close to Jesus in any way. Unlike the other disciples who frequently addressed Jesus as "Lord," Judas is never recorded as using this title for Jesus and invariably called him "Rabbi" – acknowledging him only as a teacher. So Judas seems to have gladly accepted the thirty pieces of silver offered to him by the Jewish authorities to betray Jesus to them – even though the amount may not have been a great one. Attempts to translate this payment into modern terms possibly suggest an amount less than \$100 in today's US currency. Centuries earlier, Zechariah prophesied regarding the amount and indicates that it was a small one. Speaking sarcastically, the prophet wrote:

I told them, "If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it." So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—the handsome price at which they valued me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the Lord. (Zechariah 11:12–13 and see Note 2)

Even the reference to the potter in this prophecy proved true (Matthew 27:7), but although Jesus knew that Judas would betray him (John 13:11, 18, 21, 26; etc.), his foreknowledge of Judas' actions does not mean that Judas had no free will in acting as he did (Matthew 26:24).

The Trial

The Gospel of John tells us that when Jesus was betrayed: “... They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year” (John 18:12-13). The apostle John apparently knew some of the high priest’s family and was able to provide this detail not found in the other gospels. Annas (also called Ananus and Ananias) had served as high priest for ten years, from AD 6–15 and was still the true “power behind the throne” – which is why Jesus was taken first to him, then to the current high priest, Caiaphas, and the other Jewish leaders.

Mark’s Gospel suggests that the Jewish authorities were concerned primarily with the confrontation Jesus had with traders in the temple, while Luke’s account suggests their primary concern was regarding his teachings in the temple. John emphasizes that their fear of Jesus’ rising popularity could lead to an uprising that would provoke a violent response from Rome. Doubtless all three of these factors were involved, though as time progressed the emphasis may have changed from the first to the second and then to the third – which would seem to fit the developing situation depicted in all the gospels.

In any event, all four gospels agree that Caiaphas and the Jewish authorities ultimately condemned Jesus for what they perceived as blasphemy. When Caiaphas asked Jesus if he was the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus replied, “I am” at which Caiaphas declared “Why do we need any more witnesses? ...You have heard the blasphemy” (Mark 14:61–64). But because they desired the death penalty and were unable to decree it under Roman rule, they turned Jesus over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

We have a fair amount of historical information regarding Pilate and what we know fits well with what the gospel writers record. Like any Roman official charged with keeping peace in the provinces and ensuring that loyalty to Rome and the emperor was upheld, Pilate was particularly susceptible to any suggestion that he was allowing insurrection to develop or the following of another king besides Caesar to occur. The Jewish religious authorities played on this concern (John 19:12), and despite Jesus’ obvious innocence it was almost inevitable that Pilate would deliver Jesus to be executed (see Note 3).

The Crucifixion

Since Mosaic law required that executions had to be made outside the city, the Romans accommodated this custom, and convicted individuals were put to death on the hill of Golgotha just outside of Jerusalem. The Romans usually positioned such places of execution near well-traveled roads – so that many people would see what happened to those who opposed Caesar – and this accounts for the numerous people who are said to have witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus from a short distance away (Matthew 27:39).

Crucifixion was not only one of the most disgraceful forms of death, but it was also one of the most dreaded methods of execution in the ancient world. Condemned individuals were flogged or scourged (brutally whipped) to the extent that the victim was brought to a state just short of death. This accounts for why Jesus could not carry his own cross bar (this part of the cross, called a *patibulum*, weighed 70–125 lbs.) the whole way to the execution site. Once there he was offered wine mixed with a numbing agent (Mark 15:23 and see Note 4), but he refused this help so as to be as alert as possible to fulfill the prophesied details of his death.

Death by crucifixion was often a lingering one and might last for several days. Because the Jews did not want the bodies on the crosses during the Jewish holy day, however, Pilate ordered that the legs of the crucified men be broken so that they could no longer support their own weight and would suffocate due to their body weight constricting their lungs. This was not done to Jesus, however, because he had already died after six hours on the cross (John 19:33) – thus fulfilling the prophecy that not a single bone of his body would be broken.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The gospels record seven statements that Jesus made during the six hours he was dying on the cross. These statements are of tremendous significance, as we will see, but the gospels are not always clear as to exactly when some of the statements were made – leading some to think they contradict each other. Luke recorded that Jesus said “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” directly before “he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46). However, John writes that after saying “It is finished” Jesus “bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30). But there is no real contradiction here. John was present at the cross, so he doubtless knew well what Jesus’ last words were, but the wording of John 19:30 does not preclude that as Jesus bowed his head, he prayed the words that Luke records, and that those were his actual final words. John – selective as always in what material he uses – simply stressed the “It is finished” proclamation of Jesus rather than the brief personal prayer recorded by Luke. Logically, only when Jesus had confirmed that he had completed his mission was he ready to commit his spirit into the hands of God.

Each gospel writer selected from among Jesus’ last words the ones he wanted to stress in his own account – only the combined accounts give us the full picture. A clear example of this is seen in that both Matthew (27:46–50) and Mark (15:33–37) mention that after calling out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus subsequently cried out with a loud voice before he died. Neither Matthew nor Mark mentions what the words of that cry were as they both chose to stress the statement of Jesus that was most important to their own accounts. So, it does not matter in which order Jesus’ seven last recorded statements were made, but the order in which they are given below is that accepted by most scholars.

The Seven Sayings

1) “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). The first words of Jesus on the cross are perhaps the clearest expression of his limitless grace. Despite the physical agony he was undergoing, his concern, as always, was for others. This short prayer – only twelve words in English, eight in the New Testament’s Greek – was made in accordance with Jesus’ own teaching (Matthew 5:44) and is one from which every Christian can and should learn. The prayer may well have been offered at the beginning of the crucifixion, as the nails were being driven in, but it was doubtless made not only for the Roman soldiers who had mocked him and now conducted the execution, but also for the religious authorities who had falsely accused him, and for all his enemies.

2) “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). In this statement, Jesus gave acceptance and assurance to one of the criminals on the cross who, even though shortly before his death, had expressed his faith in Jesus. There was no punctuation at the time the original gospel manuscripts were written, and over the centuries there has been theological debate on how the verse should be punctuated – whether as “Truly, I tell you, today you will” Or “Truly I tell you today, you will ...”. Greek grammar cannot determine this for us, and while Jesus did not usually say “I tell you today ...”, this was a common Hebrew idiom (Deuteronomy 30:18; etc.) and Luke’s Greek frequently follows Hebraic style (see Note 5). More important than any doctrinal significance of the verse is its stress on the focus and concern of Jesus for others even so close to his own death.

3) “When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, ‘Woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother’” (John 19:26–27). This statement is the third example of Jesus’ concern for others as he died and shows his concern that his mother be cared for after his death. The law required the firstborn son to take care of his parents, and Jesus obeyed the law of God up until the end. He placed his mother’s care in John’s hands, and we are told that from that hour John took her into his own home (John 19:27). In arranging this, Jesus also made sure that his mother would watch over John, who was evidently still relatively young at this time.

4) “At the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mark 15:34 BSB). The ninth hour was the time at which the afternoon sacrifice was made in the temple, and this would be the hour in which Jesus would die. Mark records this statement in the Aramaic in which Jesus spoke it. Although some who were present missed the point of what Jesus was saying (vs. 35), many would have realized that Jesus was quoting the first verse of Psalm 22 which prophesied the Messiah’s anguish in an incredibly detailed and accurate manner. With these words, Jesus was expressing his condition of abandonment as God placed the sins of the world on him and had therefore to “turn away” from Jesus. Under the weight of that burden, he experienced separation from God for the only time in all of eternity. This is not to say Jesus was without hope at this point – as none of us ever should be. Later in that same Psalm 22, in fact, we see the assurance Jesus would have known that God had “not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help” (vs. 24). Nevertheless, the feeling of separation from God, even if temporary, must have been a terrible thing for Jesus to bear.

5) “Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, ‘I am thirsty’” (John 19:28). Everything was fulfilled as prophesied at this point because Jesus had already thirsted before he announced it. Extreme thirst was one of the many naturally occurring agonies of crucifixion, but Jesus was here fulfilling the prophecy from Psalm 69:21: “They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.” By saying he was thirsty, Jesus prompted the Roman soldiers to give him “wine vinegar” or “sour wine.” “A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips” (vs. 29 and see Note 6). This wine not only fulfilled the prophecy of Psalm 69, but also was a figure of the “cup” of which Jesus had spoken in saying he would “drink the cup that the Father has given me” (John 18:11 ESV). It was symbolized by the cup of wine that normally ended the Passover meal, and which had not been drunk at the Last Supper (see Unit 13 of this course) but was now – in the form of the wine-soaked sponge – taken by Jesus just before his death.

6) “When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30). We will look closely at the expression “it is finished” below, but Jesus’ words meant that the whole work his Father had given him to do in order to obtain salvation for humanity was now done. Every individual part was either already accomplished, or was in place to be fulfilled as he died moments later. John, who is the only gospel writer who recorded these words, stresses them by using the word for fill or fulfill five times in three short verses – with Jesus’ dying cry being the climactic instance. For John, even the smallest details of Jesus’ death echoed the prophecies that his death so clearly fulfilled.

7) “Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he had said this, he breathed his last.” (Luke 23:46). This is clearly the cry “in a loud voice” mentioned by Matthew and Mark, and most probably the very final words of Jesus on the cross. With these words Jesus willingly gave up his spirit into his Father’s hands (John 10:17–18), trusting that God had accepted His sacrifice. Just as the first three of Jesus’ seven statements showed his concern for others, and the next three showed his concern to fulfill his Father’s will, the final statement showed Jesus’ total trust in God, despite the physical agony and spiritual separation he was enduring.

So, the last statements of Jesus are of tremendous significance not only because they show his care for others and his obedient attitude and mindset to the moment of death itself, but also because they fulfilled prophecies, pointed to him as the Messiah and Son of God, and showed the fulfillment of the plan of God for the sacrifice of his Son. Additionally, if we think about them, these seven last sayings of Jesus teach us many profound lessons that apply to our own lives here and now.

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

The Ultimate Sacrifice

When Jesus hung on the cross, he was both the ultimate sacrifice – the Lamb of God – and the High Priest offering the sacrifice made for all humanity. Jesus offered up the perfect sacrifice of his own self – of which every Old Testament sacrifice was a type and symbol – and when he died there was no further need of any other offering for sin. That is why Jesus cried out “It is finished” as he was dying. The single Greek word from which the phrase is translated in the gospel accounts of this climactic event is *tetelestai* – a word that actually had several meanings.

In classical Greek, the word *tetelestai* often depicted a turning point when one period or era ended, and another period began. In the common Greek of New Testament times, the word *tetelestai* was often used in business and legal contexts to signify the full payment of a debt. Most significantly, in New Testament times the word was also used to signify that a task had been completed. A returning servant who had been sent to fulfill a task or on a mission might exclaim “*tetelestai*” meaning “The mission is accomplished.” Used in this sense, the word does not mean just to complete a task but to carry it out fully, to bring it to complete fulfillment or to perfection. Jesus’ statement “It is finished” would have resonated with the original readers of the New Testament in all these ways – and especially with the last – and it should resonate with us in these ways also.

Because Jesus was divine as well as human, more was accomplished by that single sacrifice than any other, past or future. We are used to saying that “Jesus died for our sins,” but there is a vast world of sacrifice within those words that we can dwell on. The prophet Isaiah vividly described some of the many aspects of the sacrifice of Jesus when he wrote:

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:3–5)

Seven Lessons from the Cross

In addition to the many aspects of Jesus’ sacrifice for our forgiveness, we can draw other lessons from the story of the cross and we will consider just a few here. As fully divine and fully human, Jesus:

- 1) Needed help to carry his cross (Matthew 27:32), and he, better than anyone else, understands our need and can help us carry ours. We should never feel that Jesus does not understand our suffering (Hebrews 4:15–16).
- 2) Could save himself but chose to save us. Although possessing divine power and the ability to save himself (Matthew 26:53), Jesus emptied himself of the desire to do so in order to be able to save us.
- 3) Endured mockery and shame for us (Matthew 27:29–31) but says that we must be willing to endure embarrassment and shame for his sake (Luke 9:26).
- 4) Gave us the supreme example of not retaliating when mistreated by others (Luke 23:34) and asks that we do the same (1 Peter 2:21–23).

5) Humbled himself in order to serve us (John 13:2–5) and asks that we humble ourselves as necessary to help others (John 13:14–15).

6) Was separated from God so we can be united with him. Jesus endured what may have been the most painful aspect of his suffering (Matthew 27:46) so that we can experience the ultimate joy of oneness with God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

7) Gave everything of himself for us (Luke 22:19–20) but asks us to be willing to give up ourselves for him (Luke 14:33).

* Note 1: Judas is a Greek form of the Hebrew name Judah – a common name for Jewish men during the first century. His surname Iscariot may mean that he came from the village of Keriath, though other possibilities have been suggested, and his surname is only given in the gospels to distinguish him from several other individuals named Judas (Matthew 13:55; etc.).

* Note 2: Matthew (27:3–5, 9) recounts this prophecy, stating that it was “spoken through Jeremiah the prophet.” But there are several reasons why this is only an apparent contradiction. It was Jewish practice from an early time to often refer to a prophetic book by the major prophet in its scroll group – which in Zechariah’s case was the book of Jeremiah. But Matthew’s quotation is not exactly identical to anything found in Zechariah or Jeremiah. However, Jeremiah 18:1–4 and 19:1–13 refer to an earthenware jar and a burial place, and 32:6–15 speaks of the purchase of a field with silver – so Matthew 27:9–10 may be a mixed citation with words taken both from Jeremiah and Zechariah. In a similar way, it is often claimed that there is a contradiction between the two different accounts of Judas’ death in Matthew 27:1–10 and Acts 1:18, but these accounts simply describe different aspects of the same event.

* Note 3: Pilate’s giving in to Jewish pressure for the execution of Jesus was only one of a number of problems with his handling of his office. Eventually, Pilate was ordered back to Rome and tried for his failures.

* Note 4: Tradition tells us that this wine was given to condemned individuals by charitable women of Jerusalem who offered it in fulfillment of Proverbs 31:6–7 “Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress” (ESV).

* Note 5: Luke has a definite tendency to use the adverb *semeron* (“today”) with the preceding verb – as we see with the great majority of the twenty instances of his use of the word in Luke and Acts.

* Note 6: The branch of hyssop used to lift the wine to Jesus on the cross was of significance because it should remind us of the first Passover when each household among the Israelites in Egypt slew a perfect lamb and put the blood on the doorpost so that the death angel would pass over their houses. Moses had commanded the Israelites, “Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe” (Exodus 12:22).

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics: Memorize the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross.

Beneath the Surface: Considering all the recorded sayings of Jesus on the cross, what do we learn from what he did *not* say during this time?

Everyday Applications: The final section of this unit gives seven ways in which we can learn personal lessons from the story of Jesus’ betrayal, trial, and death. Think of another three lessons that you can personally apply.

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