

As we continue looking at the events preceding Jesus' crucifixion, we can't help but conclude at first glance that this is not a story of favor, blessing, or grace. We read it and conclude that this is a story of tragedy, failure, guilt, despair, or hopelessness because anyone who can read sees these forces at work in this story. But it would be wrong to label the events in Matthew 27 a tragedy and move on. If we do that, we miss out on the big idea of this story. Matthew chapter 27 is a story of favor and answers the ultimate question that every human being who has ever lived asks in those dark and alone moments: "What can take away my sin?"

Last week we learned the chief priests and elders had put their plan to execute Jesus in motion. They paid Judas off with 30 pieces of silver in return for revealing to the temple guard where Jesus was. They had him arrested, illegally tried, and convicted of blasphemy. This trial was illegal because it was at night, the arrested one was not allowed a defense counsel, and there were no corroborating witnesses. So, to advance their plan, they needed to do two things. They needed to do something resembling a legal trial, which is why they reconvened in the early morning light the next morning. And they needed to have Jesus executed. The Jewish people had no legal right to execute anyone. Only the Romans could hand down a conviction and a sentencing of execution, so they had to get their arch enemies, those Romans, those oppressors, to carry out their dirtiest work and kill Jesus.

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor. (Matthew 27: 1-2)

Pilate was not elected governor by the people. Pilate was appointed governor by the emperor of Rome, Tiberius Caesar. Governor of this part of the empire was not a primo assignment. Judea was a backwater. It was filled with angry Zealots and freedom fighters that the Romans considered terrorists. The people, especially these chief priests and elders, hated the Romans and Pilate knew it. Every day they were reminded of how much their nation had fallen since the glory days of King David. Now we will see what happened to Judas. The one who betrayed him the night before in the garden.

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief

priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." vv. 3-4a

He is seized with remorse. Does seized with remorse mean Judas repented of his sin? The word for remorse Matthew used is *metamelomai*, which translates "feeling of regret." It's a rare word in the New Testament and different from repentance. The common word for repentance is *metaneo* which means to feel remorse and then turn and take appropriate corrective actions. Repentance is not the word Mathew used to describe Judas. And we see that he did not take corrective action. Unlike Peter, who ran to Jesus on the beach after his betrayal, Judas acknowledged he betrayed innocent blood to the chief priests, and look at what they did. When a Jewish person sinned, where does he or she go? They went to the representation of God on earth. They went to the temple to find consolation, mercy, forgiveness, and relief from guilt. But Judas didn't find it in the temple. Look at what the chief priests said to him?

"What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. vv. 4b-5

I don't think that Judas' greatest sin was selling Jesus out to the religious leaders. I don't think it was his part of the story that led Jesus to the cross. I don't think his greatest sin was to betray Jesus, remember Jesus was alone when he was crucified. There was plenty of betrayal to go around. I think Judas' greatest sin was his decision not to believe Jesus.

Remember, Judas was there when the traitor, Zacchaeus, expressed his remorse and then turned from that life and pledged to live differently. Judas was there when the woman caught in adultery was dragged in front of Jesus, and Judas knew that the law required death to the adulteress. She ought to have been stoned. But Jesus saw in her heart remorse and a desire to live a better way. He forgave her, and I wonder if Judas believed that she was forgiven. It gives me pause to think that Judas' greatest failure can be summed up in one word: Unbelief.

There may be some of you who feel like you've done something awful. You have sinned, and you feel terribly remorseful. Maybe you are a believer in Christ. Maybe you have been a follower of Christ for years, but you can't seem to get rid of the guilt no matter how much you try to give back to God. You have this inner accuser in your head who says over and over, "You made a

bad choice. You can't undo what you have done. It's your responsibility." In your heart, in your inner temple, you hear the sound of condemnation clanging like silver coins being thrown across the floor.

The key questions for those of us who can't forgive ourselves, is this: Do you believe Jesus? Do you take Jesus at his word? If Jesus isn't telling the truth about the heart of God, then you have no hope for relief. But if Jesus was right about how outrageous the grace of God is – as his voluntary death on the cross and his victory over the grave proves, then you and I have something to believe in. We have something to live for. We can run to Jesus instead of running away from Jesus. We can feel real remorse, express real repentance, and hear the sweet sound of forgiveness, mercy, and grace before the high priest Jesus, when he meets us in the temple of our hearts. We can receive God's forgiveness. And we can forgive ourselves and move on.

Paul wrote in 2nd Corinthians 7:10, *"For Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret (Peter after his betrayal), whereas worldly grief produces death (Judas after his betrayal)."*

Judas went to the chief priests: Peter went to Jesus. Judas couldn't get his sin atoned for in the temple, so he sentenced himself to death. However, Peter got his sin atoned for through Jesus, and Jesus sentence himself to death. Peter's shed tears of repentance led him to Jesus, who shed blood for Peter's sins.

You may feel like you have much in common with Judas. You ask, "How can I forgive myself?" Instead ask, "Who can forgive me?" Dare to believe Jesus!

What Can Wash Away My Sin? Nothing but the blood of the innocent one.

The scene of our story moves from the temple in verse ten to where Jesus stood before Governor Pilate. Pilate didn't trust the Jewish people. He was smart enough to know he had to handle this issue well. If he didn't, there could be riots and if that happened, any possible promotion to a better place would be out of the question. As far as he was concerned, this was a Jewish issue and not a Roman one.

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "You have said so," Jesus replied. When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. vv. 11-12

I can imagine Pilate studied Jesus carefully. He didn't see a terrorist standing in front of him. He didn't see an insurrectionist. There was no capital crime, but he had to interrogate him. Well, they said he saw himself as a king, let me ask him. Later in verse 17 and 22 he labeled Jesus as the one called Christ, another word for king.

Jesus told Pilate, "You spoke the truth. You don't know what kind of king I am, but I am a king." With that, the charge of sedition could be pinned on Jesus. There was only one king, and his name was Herod. There was one emperor, and his name was Caesar. But deep down Pilate knew Jesus wasn't a criminal. You can tell by his next question.

Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor. vv. 13-14

Pilate asked if he has even heard the charges brought against him. But Jesus remained silent. It reminds us of Isaiah 53 and the prophecy that the Messiah would fulfill the will of God as the suffering servant who *"...was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that was led to slaughter, and like a sheep before its shearers is silent" (Isaiah 53:7).*

And Pilate was amazed at his silence. Wouldn't such a great teacher speak to defend himself? And we should be amazed too. We should be amazed that Jesus kept quiet then so we can praise the Lord today. As John Calvin said,

"God's Son stood trial before a mortal man and suffered accusation and condemnation that we might stand without fear in the presence of God. Christ kept silent then so he could be our spokesman now. His silence = our salvation."

No one on earth looked less like a king as Jesus at that moment when he stood before Pilate. Pilate couldn't have imagined when he woke up that morning he would be confronted by the greatest crises of his career. He simply wanted to be neutral. To be innocent of an innocent man's death. But as Jesus stood before him, Pilate had to be troubled. Jesus was either the king he claimed to be, or he was not. He was either innocent or guilty. The King was about to voluntarily die in order to save his subjects and bring them into his eternal kingdom.

And for each of us today, Jesus is either the king, or he is not. If we take Jesus at his word, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords deserves a response. "Yes Jesus, I acknowledge you are king, and I want to become your subject today." Each of us can bow to him now and experience life as it was meant to be, or we can bow to him later on the solemn day of final judgment.

What Can Wash Away My Sin? Nothing but the blood of the royal one.

What was Pilate going to do to try to save his career? He had one more card to play.

Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by (better translation: "for") the crowd. At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. vv. 15-16

The choice between who can wash away my sin and who can not wash away my sin could not be made clearer by Matthew. Barabbas was a killer, a murderer, and he was waiting to die on a cross between two other criminals. Early manuscripts show that Barabbas's first name was actually Jesus. Jesus Barabbas, literally, Jesus, son of the earthly father. In Pilate's mind, it was a choice between two Jesuses. Jesus the son of the Barabbas, literally son of an earthly father, or Jesus the Son of the Heavenly Father. So, Pilate had an idea.

So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him. vv. 17-18

In Pilate's mind it was a choice between two Jesuses, and for him, it was no choice at all. Barabbas was guilty. It was a no brainer, and a brilliant plan. "Do you want a violent man who will kill and destroy to become a king or a peaceful man who claims to be the king of a kingdom of love? Do you want the tall, mighty, and violent king Saul or the little shepherd boy David who was a man after God's own heart?" Pilate was gambling that the crowd would turn on the Chief Priests and want to release Jesus called the Messiah.

Up to this point, Pilate seemed to handle this trial very well. He heard the charge; he investigated the evidence. He knew envy was the real reason why Jesus was standing before him. And he had no basis for charging him with anything. And to reinforce that he was on the right track, Pilate's wife entered the story.

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him." v. 19

Pilate and his wife got tucked into bed the night before, and his wife had a disturbing dream. The details of her dream were not revealed, but apparently, it was a nightmare. Dreams were held in high regard. In fact, Matthew recorded God speaking in dreams warning Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt. It was a dream that warned the magi not to trust Herod. Whether Pilate's wife's dream was a direct message from God or just common sense, she knew the man standing before her husband was innocent. She got it when no one else did.

But Pilate found himself trapped. He had miscalculated. The chief priests knew Pilate didn't want any unrest in Jerusalem to be reported back to Rome. So, they leveraged this to get Pilate to murder Jesus.

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered. "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked. They all

answered, "Crucify him!" "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" vv. 20-23

What now? Pilate's plan backfired. The crowd didn't pick the right guy. They chose to release the guilty and condemn the innocent. Jesus always calls us to make a choice about him. To accept him and follow him or oppose him and turn away from him.

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!" All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children! Then he released Barabbas to them. vv. 24-26a

And the uproar by the crowd grew louder as they taunted Pilate by yelling Crucify Him! Crucify Him! Pilate's public act of washing his hands was a ceremonial act to distance himself from guilt. It would symbolically exonerate him, but moral guilt doesn't wash off in a bowl of water. This brings to mind Shakespeare's famous play, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, when Lady Macbeth cried out, "Out, damn'd spot! out, ... What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" Washing hands does not cleanse a defiled soul. All the water in the world cannot wash blood from a guilty person's hands. Only blood removes blood. Only Jesus' blood removes the stain of sin. And the crowd was quick to accept responsibility. Imagine yelling to get the guilt for crucifying the Son of God!

Even though he knew of Jesus' innocence, Pilate released Barabbas to the crowd. What does this have to do with us? The answer: You are Barabbas. I am Barabbas. We are all Barabbas. Jesus Christ was not only his substitute. He was our substitute. He not only died in Barabbas' place, he died in our place. Barabbas was set free; we are set free. Jesus Christ died for us.

Why did he do that? Why did he voluntarily become our scapegoat? The answer is simple: He is the only one who had the power to win the battle over the curse of sin and death.

Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole" (Gal. 3:13).* Jesus changed places with us and put himself under the curse of sin, and paid the penalty for us.

What Can Wash Away My Sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus of the sacrificial one

Jesus, the innocent and righteous one, was the only one who could be the sacrifice that could actually pay the penalty for our sins, and he died in our place as our substitute. The work of satisfying the justice of God began immediately.

But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. v. 26b

As much as I would like to skip this part and move on, we must stop here. Flogging meant that Jesus, now the criminal to die for our sins, was tied to post and repeatedly beat with a series of long leather straps, some of which contained pieces of metal or bone that tore into the skin, muscles, and tendons. The beatings were so horrendous that many died from their wounds before they were nailed to a cross.

Why? Why would Jesus, who will one day judge of the world, submit himself to be judged and punished with such torture? Because in order for the penalty for our sins to be paid, the penalty must fall on someone with no sin in them at all. The Bible said, *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"* (11 Cor. 5:21).

The payment for every sin committed by every person in the past, present, and future tore into Jesus in that courtyard. Everything that had happened and was about to happen was under God's control and for the ultimate purpose to save us and glorify his Son, Jesus.

All the wrath of a Holy God against sin came down on Jesus as those metal shards ripped through his body. And as the whip did its job and left bleeding wounds from his head to his feet, his blood flowed. His blood flowed over us and washed away our sins and paid our debts. In that courtyard in Jerusalem, the justice of God was finally, once and for all, being wielded over every evil, every injustice past, present, and future. The massive sin debt accumulated was being paid in full once and for all.

The torture was not just physical; it was also emotional. The King of the universe was mocked and humiliated by soldiers that he would, in a matter of hours, cry out to his father to have mercy on.

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. vv. 27-31

The prophet Isaiah said that our Savior was crushed for our iniquities, pierced for our transgressions, by his wounds we are healed.

What Can Wash Away My Sin? Nothing but the blood of the perfect lamb of God the suffering one.

What is our response today for the one who can wash away my sin and your sin? Thank Him! Thank him that he entered your world that day. He took on every sin whether it was genocide in Africa, or bullying on social media. Whether it is sex trafficking or lying on your school report card. Thank him for dying for all the sins in the world and all the sins in your heart.

Thank him that he died for the time you cheated on your taxes, for the time you lusted after your neighbor's spouse, for when you thought too highly of yourself, and not highly enough for your neighbor, for when you drank too much. Thank him for forgiving sins of adultery, arrogance, backbiting, bearing false witness, bitterness, blasphemy, boasting, complaining, coveting, deceit, defrauding others, despising the poor, disrespecting parents and elderly, envy, evil thoughts, fornication, gambling, giving grudgingly or not at all, gluttony, gossip, greed, harsh words, holding a grudge, idleness, idolatry, losing your temper, lying, malice, murder, prayerlessness, racism, rage, rape, resisting the Holy Spirit, selfish ambition, slander, sloth, stealing, violence, and loving the world and not loving your neighbor, or not loving God.

Your debt was paid in full by Jesus. Give thanks to the innocent one, the royal one, the sacrificing one and the suffering one. Give thanks that his blood has washed away your sins! What can wash away our sin? Jesus is the only one.

One more thing, hear the tragic message from Pilate that still speaks to us through history: Don't wash your hands and walk away from your responsibility to accept Jesus, to thank Jesus, and to follow Jesus.

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! ... forever and ever! (Revelation 5: 12-13)