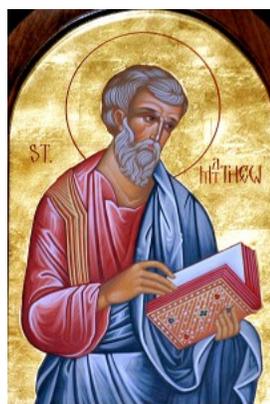




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The Passion Matthew's Gospel



The Passion in the Gospel of Matthew

Throughout his gospel, Matthew follows closely the storyline of his primary source Mark but still colors that story characteristic of his gospel.

The same is true of the passion story where Matthew's account absorbs virtually all of Mark's story; yet here, too, Matthew narrates to highlight his own distinctive themes. In meeting death Jesus fulfills his God-given destiny foreshadowed in the Old Testament and inaugurates a new age of history charged with resurrection life. Jesus is the obedient Son of God, tenaciously faithful amidst of abject suffering. Jesus' trust in God, tested in the savage fury of death itself, is not in vain.

The Gathering Storm

Matthew 26:1-16

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "As you know, the Passover is two days away — and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the elders of the people, who will kill him and hand him over to be crucified." Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to kill him some sly way and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people." While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man named Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, the good news that she did for me will also be told, in memory of her." Then one of the Twelve — the one called Judas Iscariot — went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Matthew portrays Jesus' passion as an encounter with destiny, not a destiny of blind fate but one made inevitable by the strong commitments of Jesus to God and the fierce resistance of the power of death.

The opening scenes of the passion story set the mood. Matthew begins with a solemn introduction (26:1-5): now that Jesus has finished all of his life's work for Israel, he is ready to enact his most powerful teaching and most compelling example. With the penetrating insight of the Son of God, Jesus calmly foretells to his disciples the coming events of the passion.

In contrast with the serenity of Jesus, the religious leaders gather to forge a desperate plot. Even as they determine to arrest him "by treachery" they still hold a magnetic hold on the people of Israel. Throughout his gospel Matthew portrays the religious leaders in a single, negative dimension. They symbolize opposition to Jesus and his message and their vices illustrate what a disciple is not to be.

Not everyone rejected Jesus, as the poignant scene of the anointing demonstrates (26:6-13). When he is in Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem dining at the leper's home (so typical of Jesus' compassion for the sick and outcasts), an unnamed woman offers Jesus a lavish gesture of hospitality and love. She anoints him with precious perfumed oil.

While in the first century world anointing guests with oil was not unknown in banquets of the wealthy, the disciples of Jesus consider the woman's action and extravagant. But for Jesus and the gospel, this act of lavish love is just right for the fateful moment of the passion. The woman anoints Jesus on the prophets and kings were anointed—thus she offers Jesus' the homage he is due. And, as Jesus himself proclaims, in lovingly anointing his body she has pre-empted death and burial. Loving reverence for Jesus and an understanding of his death are signs of true discipleship—and so the bold gesture of this anonymous woman will be remembered "wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world." Without question this is the most remarkable endorsement of any character in the New Testament.

In stark contrast to the tender and bold love of the woman, Judas, one of Jesus' twelve apostles, goes to the chief priests and sells his soul in betraying Jesus. Jesus alone notes the counting out of "thirty pieces of silver," the price of slave according to Exodus 21:32. Undoubtedly, Judas was a painful enigma to the early church: how could one of the Twelve chosen by Jesus so betray him? Matthew's Gospel does not underestimate the corrosive influence of money and greed: "where is your treasure... You cannot serve God and mammon" (6:21,24).

The cast of characters is on stage—Jesus, his disciples, his opponents. The machinery of betrayal and death begins to turn. And, notes Matthew, Judas went for an opportunity to hand him over" (26:16). The Greek word Matthew uses for "opportunity" is *eukairion*—the *kairos*, the moment of choice and destiny. Here: Both Judas and Jesus move towards the same fateful moment—for one it will be a time of betrayal and self-destruction; for Jesus, a moment of ultimate life-giving.

The Kairos: Matthew 26:17-35

Matthew 26:17-35

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples in your house.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me." They all were sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?"

Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to the one who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you."

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." After I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same.

The next set of scenes focus on Jesus' last meal with his disciples. It is the eve of Passover, the beginning of the great pilgrimage feast when Jews from all over the Roman world celebrated the Exodus, God's liberation of the people from slavery and death. With majestic solemnity Jesus begins the preparatory meal for the Passover. He sends disciples into Jerusalem giving them precise instructions on preparing for the supper. The words of Jesus, unique to Matthew, are significant: "My appointed time draws near" (26:18). The Greek word *kairos* is used again, signifying the decisive moment of history when an old world would give way to a new age would be born. For Matthew the death and resurrection of Jesus are in fact the turning point in all of human destiny.

The disciples obediently follow Jesus' commands and all is ready for the Passover celebration. The mood of this farewell supper is laced with both joy and sorrow. In Semitic culture as in so many others, the meal was a sacred moment, a time in which the common bonds of life and friendship were to be renewed. Against that backdrop, Jesus predicts that one of the twelve would violate the bond between disciple and master. The other disciples are distressed by the prediction. The question that is to echo in the heart of every Christian who has to face his or her infidelity: "Is it I, Lord?" (26:22).

Judas becomes the antitype of the disciple, a figure that seems to fascinate the evangelist. All of human history is entwined mysteriously with God's providence, the terrible failure of apostasy and betrayal. But the reality of God's providential love does not rob us of our responsibility. Throughout his gospel Matthew tells this theme: we are accountable to God for our choices and our actions. If Judas chooses death, death he will experience. As if sealing his fate, Judas echoes of the other disciples: "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" (26:25), an ironic touch found only in Matthew's account.

At the conclusion of the meal Jesus would return to the tragic theme of betrayal and failure (26:31-34). Not only Judas but all of the disciples, including Jesus had blessed as their leader (16:16) and sustained upon the chaotic sea (14:28-31), would find their loyalty to Jesus break upon the shoals of intense fear. Even these bleakest of moments do not escape the embrace of God's Word; the failure of the disciples fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah 13:7, "I will be a shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be dispersed".

These predictions of betrayal and failure form a poignant frame around the key moment of the Passover meal. Using vivid, indelible symbols, Jesus tells the meaning of his death. The bread broken is his body given for them; the cup poured out is his blood, the "blood of the covenant" offering God's for unquenchable love to all. All of Jesus' ministry—every word of liberating truth, every healing touch, every confrontation with injustice—is distilled here in the cup, in the body and blood of Jesus given totally for the sake of the world.

This last supper is not really the final Passover for Jesus and his disciples. He would celebrate it again "new" in the Kingdom of God. Despite their wearily loyal love for the disciples would gather them once again beyond the boundaries of death.

Gethsemane

Matthew 26:36-56

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me, not as I will, but as you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked them and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.

So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you sleeping? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the scribes. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and

Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for."

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"

At that time Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled."

Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

The pace of the passion story begins to quicken. Jesus and his disciples leave the supper room and go to a secluded grove of olive trees (Luke locates Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives). There Jesus takes three of his disciples and begins a vigil of intense and anguished prayer. His words evoke Psalm 42—"My soul is sick because of death" (26:38). The master who had taught his disciples the importance of direct, honest and trusting prayer (6:5-15) now prays with all his heart as he faces death. Jesus falls prostrate on the ground and opens his spirit to God: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will" (26:39). All of the mystery of Jesus is expressed in this prayer: a human being clinging to life and fearing death; a faithful child of God who places all of his trust in the hands of a loving Father.

Three times Jesus repeats his intense prayer. He had asked his disciples to keep vigil with him but they are overwhelmed with sleep and once more fail. Their sleep is symbolic of their spiritual torpor—they are not prepared for the fury of death that is about to sweep through Gethsemane and threaten the life

The storm of death arrives when Judas leads a large crowd armed with swords and clubs into the garden to arrest Jesus (26:47). Once again Matthew's special attention to this doomed disciple. With scorching irony a kiss becomes the sign of treachery. As he had at the supper, Judas masks his betrayal with innocent words: "Hail, Rabbi!" But Jesus sees deeply into the soul of Judas and even in the very instant of betrayal addresses him as "friend".

The armed mob takes Jesus captive but in a futile gesture one of the disciples draws a sword and severs the ear of the high priest's servant. In Matthew's becomes an opportunity for Jesus to teach. He warns the disciple not to return violence for violence—those who live by the sword die by the sword. In the Mount, Jesus had urged his disciples not to turn to violence (5:21-26, 38-42); a child of God must love even the enemy (5:43-48). If it were a simple matter of power, God could overwhelm Jesus' attackers with legions of angels. But God's reign revealed in the scriptures would not be imposed by violence. would take him into the valley of death but, ultimately, the scriptures would be fulfilled and love would defeat violence and death.

But for now the forces of evil seem to have the upper hand. Faced with that prospect the disciples succumb to fear and desert Jesus to his captors.

Jesus on Trial

Matthew 26:57-27:10

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him close right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you an answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath before God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"

"He is worthy of death," they answered. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Why do you not answer?"

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus and he denied it again, with an oath: 'I don't know the man!'" After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for you give the word Jesus had spoken: 'Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.'" And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."

"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. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they decided to use the money to buy the Field of Blood as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "I will buy the Field of Blood with thirty silver coins, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

The mob leads its prisoner to Caiaphas the high priest and the assembled scribes and elders. Matthew portrays this as a formal hearing in which the leaders take testimony against Jesus, interrogate him and finally condemn him.

The gospel's dramatic sense is evident. The whole scene of Jesus on trial, fearlessly facing his captors, is framed by the story of Peter's denial. While the other disciples had fled in headlong panic, Peter had trailed the mob at a distance and followed his captive master into the courtyard of the high priest. But here his effort would fail him. Some of the maidservants recognize him as a companion of Jesus the Galilean; under this scrutiny Peter denies his discipleship, swearing that "I do not know the man!". Jesus had warned his disciples to avoid oaths and to tell the plain truth (5:33-37); now Peter compounds his failures. At that moment the cock crows and the broken disciple remembers Jesus' warning at the supper. The enormity of his failure crashing in on him, Peter leaves the courtyard bitterly.

Jesus meanwhile stands before the high priest and the Sanhedrin. The parade of witnesses against Jesus is not impressive so finally the high priest must question the silent captive: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?" (26:63). The reader who has followed Jesus through the gospel knows the answer to this question: Yes, the Spirit; Jesus the revealer of God's truth and bearer of God's healing power—this man is, indeed, the longed for messiah and God's unique Son.

The high priest's own question states the truth he cannot recognize. Jesus goes on to prophesy that he will be exalted as the triumphant Son of Man enthroned at the right hand and coming at the end of time on the clouds of heaven (26:64). But for now such triumph is apparent only to the eye of faith; for the leaders thought Jesus was the messiah but an impostor and blasphemer worthy of death. Their hostility spills over into violence and mockery as they spit on Jesus and strike him, taunting him with messianic power (26:67). At dawn the assembly reconvenes and they formally condemn Jesus to death and lead him away to the Pilate, the Roman governor.

Before Matthew concludes this scene he picks up the thread of Judas' story (27:3-10). The betrayer is overwhelmed with regret and attempts to return the silver to the religious leaders, confessing that he had betrayed innocent blood. But they rebuff him and in despair he casts the coins into the temple. Even though the leaders had refused the blood money it still comes back to haunt them. They collect the coins and use them to purchase a tomb for strangers.

This tragic story strangely echoes for Matthew the foreboding story of Jeremiah 19, where the prophet breaks a potter's flask in a field as a sign of judgment on Jerusalem, a field that would be used to bury strangers. Once again for Matthew's Gospel even the most abject moments of human existence do not lack God's encompassing purpose.

The Messiah Condemned

Matthew 27:11-31

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. When he was asked by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer.

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.

Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him. 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. I myself suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

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, the one or the other?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify 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, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

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 and 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.

The passion story shifts to a new scene as Jesus is brought to trial before Pilate, the Roman procurator. Now themes of kingship and allegiance come to the fore. Pilate questions Jesus on his identity as a king but the mysterious prisoner offers no response to the accusations hurled at him by the leaders. The Christians know that Jesus is truly a king but a king unlike any that Pilate could understand.

It was apparently a custom to release to the crowd a prisoner of their choice on the occasion of the Passover. Pilate offers the assembled people a choice between Barabbas, a "notorious prisoner" (27:16) or Jesus. Ancient manuscripts suggest that Matthew may have dramatically heightened the focus of the choice by naming Barabbas actually named "Jesus the one called Barabbas" paralleling "Jesus, the one called the Christ".

Each time Pilate offers that choice the leaders and the crowds choose to free Barabbas and demand to have Jesus crucified. Matthew builds the dramatic moment. In a gesture reminiscent of the ritual for declaring innocence in Deuteronomy 21, Pilate washes his hands and tells the crowd: "I am innocent of this blood. Look to it yourselves." In reply, the "entire people" declares: "His blood be upon us and upon our children." (27:24-25).

For nearly two thousand years this passage has been tragically misinterpreted as an excuse to punish Jews for their supposed guilt for the death of Jesus. The question that Matthew intends this as a dramatic and decisive moment. Jesus, Son of Abraham, Son of David, had come to his people and like the prophets had experienced rejection. All of the opposition led by the errant leaders now culminates here in the passion story. While the Gentile Pilate declares his innocence, Jesus' own people accept responsibility for his innocent blood. Matthew sees here a turning point in history which would ultimately lead to the mission to the Gentiles.

But did the evangelist intend this text as a perpetual condemnation of his own Jewish people? Certainly not! Matthew surely faulted Jesus' contemporaries for their rejection of the gospel and may even have interpreted the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem during the Jewish revolt of 66-70 A.D. as a sign of God's punishment on that generation (that is, "us and our children"). But there is no evidence he intended this text to be an excuse for anti-Semitism or believed that Jesus' people should be exempt from being treated with the same compassion, forgiveness and justice the disciples of Jesus should show to every human being. It is much more the very flesh and blood to which Jesus belongs.

Jesus the king was now condemned by his own people and by the Roman authorities. The soldiers mock his seeming powerlessness, using the symbols of power—the crown, the scepter, and the rituals of homage—to deride Jesus. But the reader knows another truth: Jesus is invested with God's power—not the power of brute force or domination but the liberating power of love and justice.

The Dawn of a New Age

Matthew 27:32-66

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of the Skull). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. When they had crucified him, they divided his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!' In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.''' In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani—which means my God, why have you forsaken me? When some of those standing there heard this, they said, 'He's calling Elijah.' Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, 'Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him.' And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. The centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was God!'

Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons. As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself been a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other women were sitting there opposite the tomb.

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. 'Sir,' they said, 'we remember that while he was still alive he said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.'

'Take a guard,' Pilate answered. 'Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.' So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and leaving the guard.

The climax of Matthew's passion narrative is filled with drama. His cross carried by Simon the Cyrenian, Jesus is led to Golgotha for crucifixion. The executioners place a placard to the cross: "This is Jesus: the King of the Jews". They obviously intend the words to ridicule this messianic pretender as he is defeated in a stream of passersby mock Jesus' claims to authority over the temple and to taunt him by reminding him that he could apparently save others but not save the two rebels crucified with him join in the chorus of revulsion.

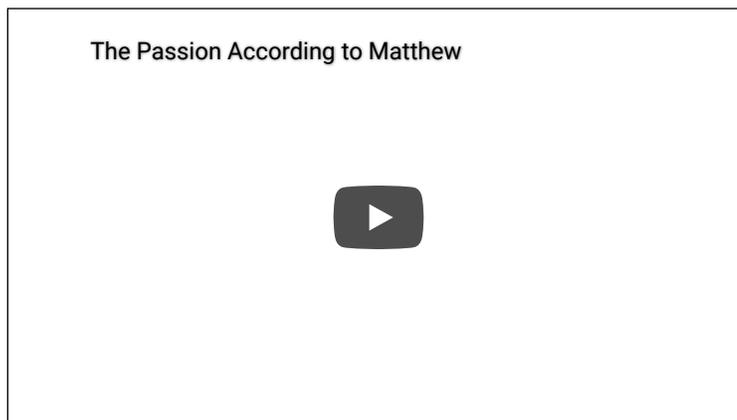
In describing this terrible moment, Matthew once again reaches back to the Hebrew scriptures for his inspiration. As in Mark's gospel, Jesus' final prayer from Psalm 22, the great prayer of lament. In that powerful text, a faithful Jew prays in the midst of abject suffering and isolation. He is surrounded by ridicule his trust in God. Feeling abandoned even by God, the psalmist utters a prayer of raw faith: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" It is an unadorned prayer that Matthew places on the lips of Jesus as the sky darkens, God's faithful son encounter death.

But just as the lament psalm turns unexpectedly to a hymn of triumph and praise (see Psalm 22:23-32), the crucifixion scene transforms into an explosion as if God responds to the lingering sound of Jesus' death prayer: the veil of the Temple is torn in half, the earth shakes, the rocks split and the tombs are opened. A triumphant procession of the saints who had been trapped in death enter the holy city of Jerusalem. The Roman soldiers who had kept the death watch are astounded and acclaim Jesus as the true Son of God.

Matthew's Gospel anticipates in this triumphant scene the glory of the resurrection. Evoking Ezekiel's great vision of the dry bones (see Ezekiel 37:1-14), it proclaims that God has responded to the obedient death of Jesus by raising him and all the saints of Israel from death to new life. Earthquakes, the raising of the dead, these were all biblical signs of the end of the world. And in a very true sense Jesus' death marked the end of a world without hope and the beginning of God's Spirit.

Still to come in the gospel story was the reverent burial by Joseph, the futile attempts of Jesus' opponents to contain him even in death, and the visit of the women disciples to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. But in Matthew's Gospel these are almost anti-climactic because resurrection breaks out on Golgotha. In that very moment death seems to have the upper hand. The trust of Jesus even in the face of mockery and abandonment is met immediately by God's abiding and immortal embrace.

The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ According to Matthew



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