

Masterwork of the Messiah

Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

Down To Death, Up To Victory

Matthew 26:1-5

Written By

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Just how important is the cross of Christ? I'll let godly people from the past answer the question.

- The cross alone is our theology (Martin Luther).
- No man understands the Scriptures, unless he be acquainted with the cross (Martin Luther).
- There is no health of soul, nor hope of eternal life, except in the cross (Thomas a Kempis).
- The cross of Christ is Jacob's ladder by which we ascend into the Highest Heaven (Thomas Traherne, English poet, clergyman, and theologian, 1636-1674).

The cross of Christ stands as the apex, the pivotal point, the zenith of the salvific, redemptive plan of a holy God for unholy man. The cross of Christ changes everything, for by means of the cross, Jesus, the perfect God-man, became sin for us and summarily dealt a death blow to sin and death, thereby opening the way to heaven for those who come to Him in believing faith.

It is no wonder, then, that Matthew's gospel, designed to showcase and prove the messianic divinity of the Savior, Jesus, should close with two full chapters dealing with the

heart-wrenching, soul-stirring graphic details of the Redeemer's journey to the cruel cross for each of us. Having just recounted how the Lord would one day usher in His long-awaited utopian Davidic kingdom of peace and holiness on earth in two insightful chapters (Matthew 24-5), Matthew turns to detail the mission of the Master to secure salvation for sinners. The point cannot be missed either: *Before glorification, before exaltation of the King, there must first be the humiliation and degradation of the King, as our substitutionary sacrifice, so He, alone can rightfully reign as the ultimate victor over all in the kingdom age and in eternity.* And as we shall see from these memorable, moving chapters, nothing and nobody, in the seen or unseen world, could possibly derail, circumvent, shipwreck, stall, or thwart God's desire to secure salvation for sinners by sending His Son downward toward the cross on Calvary. Such is the message driven home to us by the Spirit of God in the opening five verses of this new narrative:

Divine Design Is Salvation's Sure Sign (Matthew 26:1-5)

From the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), God lovingly and strategically worked to bring forgiveness and salvation to sinful creatures through blood sacrifice. His first prophetic curse, directed contextually at the Devil, hinted to this end:

¹⁵ And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel (Genesis 3:15).

The great cosmic fight between good and evil, holiness and sin would rage between Satan's seed and the seed of the woman, i.e., the Messiah, the Savior, resulting in Satan bruising the heel of the Savior. Concerning this bruising, John Bunyan writes:

'And thou shalt bruise his heel.' By these words, a necessity was laid upon Jesus Christ to assume our flesh, to engage the devil therein; and also because of the curse that was due to us for sin, that he might indeed deliver us therefore; even for awhile to fall before this curse, and to die that death that the curse inflicteth: 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.' Thus therefore did Satan, that is, by the fruits and effects of sin, bruise, or kill, the flesh of Christ: But he being God, as the Father, it was not possible he should be overcome. Therefore his head remaineth untouched. A man's life lieth not in his heel, but in his head and heart; but the Godhead being the head and heart of the manhood, it was not possible Satan should meddle with that; he only could bruise his heel; which yet by the power of the Godhead of this eternal Son of the Father, was raised up again from the dead: 'He was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification' (Rom 4:25).¹

¹ Bunyan, John. *An Exposition of the First Ten Chapters of Genesis*, Vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006): 437.

The cross represents the bruising of the Messiah's heel by the Devil; however, that cross wedded to the historical resurrection of that same Savior, represents the divine kill-shot to the head of Satan and sin ... and *nothing or nobody could thwart this redemptive plan of the Almighty.*

God makes sure we see His plan to provide cleansing for sinners stained by sin by weaving it into the fabric of Old Testament historical accounts:

- We see redemption secured by cross through the story of God's acceptance of Abel's blood sacrifice over that of Cain's sacrifice from the field (Genesis 4).
- We see redemption secured by cross through the story of God giving Abraham a ram as a substitute for his only son, Isaac (Genesis 22).
- We see redemption secured by cross through the story of Israel's deliverance from the hard, ruthless bondage of Israel by the slaying of Passover lambs (Exodus 12).
- We see redemption secured by cross through the story of sacrifices slain at the entrance of the Temple so people could secure access to God's holy presence (Leviticus 1-7).
- We see redemption secured by cross through the story of the serpent lifted up on a tall stake to provide deliverance to all those sinners who would look to it in faith, believing God's word that this one look would bring health and not death (Numbers 21).
- We see redemption secured by cross through the story of the appropriate sacrifices rendered on Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, so sinners could find acceptance before a holy God (Leviticus 23).

One can't read through the Old Testament story and not see how God, from the very beginning of man's willful, arrogant movement away from Him, developed His loving, strategic plan to save sinners by bringing His only Son to be their sin-substitute on the cross. And as I have said, *nothing or nobody would or could thwart the redemptive purpose of the Almighty.* Isaiah reminds us of this facet of God's person in numerous places in his writing. Here's one:

²⁷ For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back? (Isaiah 14).

Yes, who can frustrate the plans of God? No one in the heavenly sphere, or on earth. As Isaiah drove this concept home in his time, Matthew drove it home in his day as he recounted how God worked in and through all the dastardly, dangerous, and deadly details of His Son's last three days on earth in Matthew 26:1-5.

¹ When Jesus had finished all these words, He said to His disciples, ² "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is to be handed over for crucifixion." ³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; ⁴ and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him. ⁵ But they were saying, "Not during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people" (Matthew 26).

A careful analysis of this inspired historical narrative reveals three concepts which readily support the notion presented above; namely, that divine design is salvation's sure sign.

The Timing Is Divinely Timely

Moving from eschatology to soteriology, from a discussion about the end-times to His up and coming death on Friday, Jesus underscored, and rightfully so, how coronation had to be preceded by degradation and humiliation as prophesied (Psalm 22; Isaiah 53).

¹ When Jesus had finished all these words, He said to His disciples, ² "You know that after two days the Passover is coming ...

Hold it right there, please.

Matthew's opening words here, viz., when Jesus had finished all these words (Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πάντα τοὺς λόγους τούτους εἶπεν), to any Jew acquainted with the Old Testament and readily aware that Jesus was, in fact, the perfect fulfillment of the prophecy of a greater Moses who would come one day (Deuteronomy 18), they would quickly formulate the correlation between Jesus and Moses. Why? Moses had spoken the same way at the end of his life.

So Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel ... (Deuteronomy 31:1-2

When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, ... (Deuteronomy 32:45), in Greek, "αὶ συνετέλεσεν Μωυσῆς λαλῶν παντὶ Ἰσραηλ."

Concerning this grammatical correlation between Jesus and Moses, David Garland astutely remarks in his commentary called Reading Matthew:

The difference is that Moses, at the end of his life, can only bless the people for their journey into the promised land and cannot go with them (Deut 32:48–52). Jesus takes the final step in the deliverance of his people alone, and it is they who break faith with him and prove themselves as yet unable to go with him.²

But He, out of love for them, would go anyway to the destiny of the cross in order to bring redemption not only to Israel but to all peoples, which is you and me. Amazing. The second Moses brought a deliverance from spiritual bondage the first Moses could have never comprehended in battling Pharaoh over physical bondage.

And to think the battle of all battles concerning the bondage of all bondages, would happen to transpire at Passover. This is no fluke, no amazing coincidence, but rather a part of the well-thought-out, carefully orchestrated plan of God to secure redemption for sinners. Passover, the first of the Jews seven divinely ordained feasts (Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles), was instituted by God as the tenth plague to break Pharaoh's iron-fisted grip on His chosen people, Israel (Exodus 12).

² Garland, David E. *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel*. Reading the New Testament Series (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2001): 251.

Regarding this feast, the Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible gives us much needed background information:

Three annual feasts which followed the seasons of the year rather than phases of the moon furnished important occasions for commemorating God's power and provision in national life. These festivals were designated by the term *hag*, indicating a festival usually observed by some sort of pilgrimage. These three festivals were prescribed in Exodus 23:14-17 and Deuteronomy 16:16, and consisted of the feast of Passover and unleavened bread, the feast of weeks (Pentecost), and the festival of booths (tabernacles). On these occasions all the males of Israel were commanded to make pilgrimage to the sanctuary and celebrate these "feasts of the Lord" (Ex 12:14). The Passover and the feast of unleavened bread were originally separate ordinances, but since the latter always followed immediately upon the Passover rite, they naturally blended into a single festival.

The Passover was of supreme theological significance for the Israelites, since it marked one of the most momentous acts of divine intervention in their history, the beginning of their deliverance from bondage in Egypt when, in the final plague, God destroyed the firstborn of the Egyptians but spared those Israelites whose homes had blood smeared on the doorposts (Ex 12:11-30).³

Ah, what perfect timing. John the Baptist said these words when the Savior approached him at the Jordan River one day:

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

And, indeed, He was THE lamb of all sacrificial lamb. In fact, He was the ultimate Passover lamb, as Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians:

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Contextually, Paul speaks about church leadership dealing with moral sin among their membership, lest it contaminate the entire body politic. He reminds these believers they can, and should, strive for holy living because of their faith relationship to the Passover lamb, Jesus, whose blood has cleansed them from positional sin, resulting in giving them a new power and position to change moral behavior.

Since Christ is the Passover lamb, in the Father's mind it stands to reason He had to die on Passover. No other day would do. The Father, then, worked in every scenario of His Son's life, be it the ruthless actions of Herod the Great killing the male babies in Bethlehem to the

³ Elwell, Walter A., and Barry J. Beitzel. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988): 786.

volcanic hatred of the Sanhedrin to bring His son to Calvary's tree on that fateful Friday, which just happened to be Passover. What perfect timing.

Matthew tells us how Jesus reminded His men that they knew this day of His death was coming. He had told them countless times, had He not? The perfect tense of "you know," underscores the grammatical abiding nature of this information among the disciples:

¹⁸ The Jews then said to Him, "What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But He was speaking of the temple of His body. ²² So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken (John 2).

³⁹ But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; ⁴⁰ for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ "The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here (Matthew 12).

They had listened to Him speak on numerous occasions about His coming demise, but they didn't really hear Him. Their zeal for the coming kingdom and their placement in it obscured their vision of seeing Christ's words clearly ... but they had been told. Can you relate? Ever been guilty of hearing God speak in a Bible study, in a sermon, through a friend, or through a message you get while reading through your Bible, and you don't really listen to what God is saying? Oh, that we might listen and hear what He says to us, even if they are tough words. Many times those tough words lead to victorious times, as we see in Matthew's closing narrative.

It was Tuesday evening, which in Jewish time reckoning was really Wednesday, since they gauged the start and stop of a new day from sundown to sunup. In two days, Jesus would become the final Passover lamb. Again, He demonstrates His omniscience and prophetic ability by relating how many more days He had to live and on what day He would die. Friday, not Thursday, not Saturday He would die because Friday was Passover ... His day. With precise insider knowledge like this, we can readily see how the timing of this all was, indeed, timely ... and divinely so. And because this is true, the main idea is validated that divine design is salvation's sure sign ... but there is a second corollary to this concept:

The Method Is Divinely Methodical

Not only did Jesus know the day of His redemptive death, He knew the mode:

... and the Son of Man is to be handed over for crucifixion."

Many of the prophecies concerning the death of the Messiah are intrinsically fulfilled in this heinous, dreaded form of Roman capital punishment: Piercing of the hands and the feet (Psalm

22:16; Luke 23:33; John 20:25), being able to count one's bones exposed by this type of torture (Psalm 22:17; Luke 23:35), suffering extreme thirst (Psalm 22:15; 69:21; John 19:28), being offered gall and vinegar (Psalm 69:21; Matthew 27:34), bones not being broken ... as would typically happen in a Roman crucifixion (Psalms 34:20; John 19:33), breaking of the heart (Psalm 22:14; John 19:34), piercing the deceased side (Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34). Of the many different ways the Jewish authorities could have killed Jesus, Jesus prophetically remarked it would only be by means of crucifixion, as ordained by the Father.

He, and He alone, would lay His life down at the precise time and in the manner prophetically prescribed, just as He said He would:

¹⁸ No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father (John 10).

This is why I've been saying: *divine design is salvation's sure sign*. When the cup of the world was about to overflow with demonic rage and hatred, when mankind would commit the crime of all crimes by slaying the Son of God, when the ol' Devil though He had finally and definitively won the cosmic battle against God, God's Son would turn the mode of His death into the greatest victory mankind has ever known. Oh, the wonder of the cross. Oh, the wonder of the ways of God. Jesus, as the God-man, wasn't just willing to do the hardest thing in order to secure for us the greatest thing, viz., eternal forgiveness for sins and eternal life, He was in absolute control every step of the way. Nothing or nobody would or could ever thwart His will as He headed to that specific hill.

All of this makes you want to sing, doesn't it? I can think of nothing better than the words of Charles Wesley's *And Can It Be That I Should Gain ...*

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain—
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all: th' Immortal dies:
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no more.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;
Let angel minds inquire no more.

He left His Father's throne above
So free, so infinite His grace—

Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race:
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!

Thank you, Lord, for doing the hard thing. Thank you, Lord, for walking toward the hill when you could have walked away from it. Thank you, Lord, for being in control of your death so that you could, in every way possible, shed your rich, red, royal blood to save Adam's race, my race, me, and you.

God's design is salvation's sign as we've seen in our forgoing two points, but there is yet one more, one full of divine irony.

The Plot Is Divinely Plotted

First, let's read the text and then make some appropriate observations and applications:

³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; ⁴ and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him. ⁵ But they were saying, "Not during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people"

The phrase "the chief priests and the elders" is just another way to denote the Sanhedrin, or the



High Court. Their presence in the court of the high priest, Caiaphas, illustrates this was an impromptu and illegal meeting, especially since they sought capital punishment for a man, Jesus, who had committed no capital crime. The court of the high priest was probably located on the grounds of his magnificent mansion just southwest of the Temple.

During the time of Christ, the High

Priesthood was politically controlled by Rome. Annas, the High Priest and father-in-law of Caiaphas (Luke 3:2; Acts 4:6), was called High Priest even though he had lost his power in A.D. 15. Since, according to Mosaic Law, Israel couldn't have a new High Priest until the old one died, and since both Annas and Caiaphas are called High Priests, we must surmise they enjoyed

a powerful joint priesthood, as is intimated by Luke 3:2. Their priesthood, therefore, could be judicially and theologically classified as a false priesthood.

Ironic, isn't it? The false High Priests were going to put on trial the true High Priest, Jesus, and they sought to do it at a time not associated with the Passover festival. Why? Because, during Passover the city could swell to well over two million people, and many of these people were had either seen or heard of the teaching and miraculous power of Jesus, and they were also full of nationalistic fervor; therefore, to take out the object of their fervor could have incited a civil war, leaving the Sanhedrin on the proverbial short end of the stick. And they had good reason to fear civil unrest for Josephus records one such massive riot which preceded their devious thinking.

2. (86) Now it happened that there was a battle between him and Ptolemy, who was called Lathyrus, who had taken the city Asochis. He indeed slew a great many of his enemies; but the victory rather inclined to Ptolemy. But, when this Ptolemy was pursued by his mother Cleopatra, and retired into Egypt, Alexander besieged Gadara, and took it, as also he did Amathus, which was the strongest of all the fortresses that were about Jordan, and therein were the most precious of all the possessions of Theodorus, the son of Zeno. (87) Whereupon Theodorus marched against him, and took what belonged to himself, as well as the king's baggage, and slew ten thousand of the Jews. However, Alexander recovered this blow, and turned his force towards the maritime parts, and took Raphia, and Gaza, with Anthedon also, which was afterwards called Agrippias by king Herod. 3. (88) But when he made slaves of the citizens of all these cities, the nation of the Jews made an insurrection against him at a festival; for at those feasts seditions are generally begun; and it looked as if he should not be able to escape the plot they laid for him, and not his foreign auxiliaries, the Pisidians and Cilicians, assisted him; for, as to the Syrians, he never admitted them among his mercenary troops, on account of their of their enmity against the Jewish nation. (89) And when he had slain more than six thousand of the rebels, he made an incursion into Arabia, and when he had taken that country, together with the Gileadites and Moabites, he enjoined them to pay him tribute, and returned to Amathus; and as Theodorus was surprised at his great success, he took the fortress, and demolished it.⁴

Based on history, and knowing their own people, the religious leaders arduously worked to murder Christ at a time when all the worshippers would be long gone, leaving them far less societal and political fall-out. Believe me, this would not be the last time political and religious leaders would attempt to silence the voice of God by illegal means. This would not be the last time political ambitions and the love of power would distort a leader's actions toward the work of God. That spirit is alive and well, even in our own nation, and it is a spirit which will one day have to answer to the living God for its actions as its adherents are called before God's tribunal bar.

⁴ Josephus, Flavius, and William Whiston. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged, Wars of the Jews* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987): 1:85-89.

Focus on this thought: all of the pernicious planning behind locked, darkened doors, all of the secret and sinister counsel of these power-hungry, spiritually blind men would be to no avail. Why do I say this? Because God was in complete control of their entire process, even down to the day His Son would die for their sins and our sins. Did you get that? Please, let the irony of it all sink deep into you head and heart.

- Their plans would become God's plans.
- Their method of execution would be turned to God's method.
- Their day of Christ's demise would be tweaked and moved to become God's day, Passover, just as He had prophesied and planned so redemption's story could be properly played out on the hill of Golgotha.

This is why I've said all along in this study: *Divine design is salvation's sure sign*. Because God loves you and me, He did what needed to be done, in the right mode, on the right hill, and on the right day so we, as sinners, could find forgiveness and real, lasting, eternal life.

The question before you right now is clear: Have you looked to the cross of this Savior in faith yet? That one look of faith will change your life forever. Perhaps a timely story can move your heart toward the decision you know you need to make.

In the South China Sea at the Port of Macau the Portuguese built a magnificent cathedral, replete with a massive cross atop a high hill overlooking the bay in the 1700s. Several decades later a typhoon destroyed the church, but miraculously left the massive cross standing atop the bluff.

Sometime later Sir John Bowring (17 October 1792- 23 November 1872), an English political economist in the Netherlands, member of the English Parliament, world traveler, once Governor of Hong Kong, and linguist who spoke one hundred languages and was familiar with the inner workings of one hundred more, was moved by Galatians 6:14:

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The words were so powerful to him he wrote the well-worn hymn, *In The Cross of Christ I Glory*. Here are a few of the moving lyrics:

“In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time; all the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime. When the woes of life o'er take me, hopes deceive and fear annoy. Never shall the cross forsake me: Lo! It glows with peace and joy.”

Twenty-four years later, at the age of thirty-three, while traveling to Hong Kong to be their governor, he spotted that amazing, old, weathered cross atop the hill at Macau. Immediately he knew that song represented the essence of why he wrote that hymn. Life is only about one thing: Looking to that cross, to that Savior in faith.

Jesus awaits your look.