

Conquering Death

Matthew 26:1-5

Easter Sunday - April 12, 2020

Please read Matthew 26:1-5 before going further in this manuscript.

Matthew 26 is describing the scene just a few days before Jesus' death; and Jesus knew that the time for His death was close at hand. It was Tuesday of Passion Week and all kinds of preparations were being made: preparations for the Jewish Passover, which included preparations of all of the food and drink for a very special meal. Preparations for traveling to Jerusalem. Preparations for seeing extended family members. But there were also other preparations being made; preparations for Jesus' death. Preparations by the chief priests and elders, to kill Jesus, or at least, to have Him killed. Preparations by Judas, to watch for an opportunity to betray Jesus to His death. But behind all of these various preparations, God the Father had been making preparations of His own. He had a master plan that was about to unleash. It was a plan that He and Jesus and the HS had put into place before the creation of the world.¹ And now, THAT plan, was about to come to fruition, in just a few short days. There is a lot of planning going on in this morning's text. Please turn in your Bible to Matthew 26:3.

1. Many people had been plotting Jesus' death. They had been making preparations, trying to plan out some way to kill Jesus. Matthew 26:3-4 says, "Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him." Verse 4 says that "they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him." The *ESV* translates verse 4: "plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him." The *NKJV* says: "plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him." "Secret scheming," "plotting by stealth," "take by trickery." Oh yes, they thought they were being SO sneaky! But the TIMING of Jesus' death and the MEANS by which He would be killed, was not haphazard. In fact, it was ridiculous for anyone to think that they could catch Jesus by surprise; even if they did have Judas in their back pocket! Jesus' death was on God's time schedule and according to His plan.

Of course, the readers of Matthew's Gospel should have already understood this. Or, at least have begun to put the pieces together. Even as far back as Matthew 2, we read about King Herod's plot to kill Jesus. King Herod heard about someone who had been born king of the Jews, and he was not happy about it. So he tried to be sneaky. He tried to trick the Magi into telling him where Jesus was going to be born. But they're not fooled by his scheme. So Herod ends up giving orders for a terrible massacre "to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under."² Of course, Herod's plot failed; Jesus' life was protected during this time, because God had a different plan.



Another plot to kill Jesus shows up right after Jesus has the audacity to heal a man with a shriveled hand... on the Sabbath! Matthew 12:14 reports, "But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus."³ At various times throughout Jesus' life, He was under the threat of death. But all during this time, Jesus knew that all of their plotting and scheming, wouldn't amount to anything. God had a sovereign plan that couldn't be changed or knocked off course.

Jesus states it clearly in Matthew 26:2, "...the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." By stating this, Jesus doesn't mean to suggest that their clever plotting had finally caught up with Him. If anything, He LET them catch up. Jesus was planning to let Himself be handed over to be crucified. In other words, Jesus went to the cross WILLINGLY.⁴ Jesus would be handed over at this particular time because this was God's particular plan. Many people had been plotting Jesus' death, but only now, in God's providence, had the time finally come. The fact is...

¹ See Ephesians 1:4-7.

² See Matthew 2:2, 16.

³ Later on, in Matthew 21:45-46, we learn that, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet."

⁴ See John 10:18.

2. God had been long preparing for Jesus' death. Matthew 26:1-2 hints at this plan, "...he said to his disciples, 'As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'" All kinds of preparations were being made for the Passover, but as it turns out, the Passover itself was the preparation for something much, much greater. Passover is a reference to a Jewish holiday that has been practiced by the Jews, since before they were even called Jews. Back when they were still referred to as simply the Hebrew people.⁵ We learn about the Passover, way back in the 2nd book of the OT, back in Exodus 12. God was bringing His judgment on the Pharaoh, by putting to death all of the firstborn living in Egypt. The only way to overcome this deadly plague, was for the Hebrews to sacrifice a lamb, and take its blood, and put it on the sides/tops of the doorframes of their houses. This protected them from the LORD's destroying angel, who would then "pass over" their houses when the LORD saw the blood.

The 1st Passover was celebrated some 1,400 years before the time of Christ. That means that generation after generation of the Jewish people, continued this practice for over 1,000 years, right up to the time of Christ. In fact, this is the very same meal that Jesus and His disciples ate at the Last Supper; including everything from the bitter herbs, to the unleavened bread, and so on. Many Orthodox Jews are still celebrating the Passover, even to this day; even some 3,000 years after the 1st Passover.⁶ Passover, or the Festival of Unleavened Bread, began this past Wednesday night, April 8 and will last until April 16. It's over a full week of prayer, Bible reading, and feasting together. Sadly, this year COVID-19 is preventing the normal family gatherings and the pilgrimages to Jerusalem. But even MORE sadly, most of those who are still celebrating the Passover, have entirely missed Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Many deeply spiritual Jews, are failing to realize that Jesus' death on the cross in Jerusalem, some 2,000 years ago, fully satisfied God's wrath once and for all. One of the wonderful things that we celebrate on Easter Sunday, is that there is no longer any need to sacrifice any more lambs, or to put any more blood on any more doorposts.⁷ I don't mean to be disrespectful in any way, but this is a key area of belief, where Jews and Christians disagree. When Jesus said, "the Passover is two days away," He realized that His death on the cross was about to conquer death.⁸ In other words, Passover served as a prophetic word picture, up UNTIL the time of Christ. But when Jesus went to the cross, that foreshadowing was complete. Now, the Passover only serves to look back, back to the wonderful gift of God through Jesus Christ. Now Jesus, the Lamb of God, has died once and for all. He shed His blood to save mankind from sin, and to conquer death. You see, God had been long preparing for Jesus' death.

Acts 2:23 says it this way, "This man (*Jesus*) was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."⁹ It wasn't by happenstance that Jesus was killed near the time of the Passover, it was by design. God the Father had determined long ago, that the crucifixion of a Perfect Lamb, would be the means by which His wrath against sin would be satisfied. The death of Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, is what it would take to pay the price for our sin.

Acts 2:24 goes on, "But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him." God had been long preparing for Jesus' death, but not so that He could remain dead! In Matthew 26, when Jesus told His disciples that He was going to be handed over to be crucified, it wasn't a statement of defeat. It was a battle plan for victory!

⁵ See Genesis 10:21 and 14:13 and footnotes in *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 27, 33-34.

⁶ Can you imagine that? Having a family custom that goes back over 3,000 years!? Learn more at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/08/world/passover-2020-coronavirus-real-plague/index.html>

⁷ In other words, some of the Jews in Jesus' day, crucified Him as a "messianic pretender." *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Ed. by Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1992, p. 155.

⁸ See Hebrews 10:1-10.

⁹ These are the words of the Apostle Peter addressing a crowd of his fellow Jews on the Day of Pentecost. See Acts 2:14.

3. Jesus was preparing to conquer death. Jesus had a plan for death. For His whole life, Jesus wasn't avoiding death, or running away from it, or hiding from it. He wasn't afraid of death. Jesus had a particular strategy against death; He intended to conquer it! He was preparing to defeat it! To overcome death once and for all! We read about this near the end of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 28:1-6 tells us, "After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said..."

"Just as He said;" you see, the plan wasn't just for Jesus to die, it was for Him to rise again! In fact, at least three different times in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus told them that this was the plan: for Him to rise again!

In Matthew 16:21 Jesus said that...

"...he must be killed and on the third day **be raised to life.**"

In Matthew 17:23 Jesus predicts,

"They will kill him, and on the third day he will **be raised to life...**"

In Matthew 20:19 Jesus says,

"...crucified. On the third day he will **be raised to life!**"

There is NO doubt about it; Jesus came to conquer death! This is such Good News for us mortal humans, because each one of us knows that our earthly bodies will only last so long. Eventually, we will die from one thing or another. Easter Sunday invites each one of us to consider an important question: Am I prepared for death? As you consider that question, let me share some Good News: Jesus came to conquer death, but not just His OWN death. He came to conquer OUR death as well. BOTH our death, and our fear of death. Here's what God's Word says in Hebrews 2:14-15, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

Let me be frank here: the recent COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of fear. Death, which for most of us felt a long way off, has now reared its ugly head. It feels potentially closer than ever. In a way this is a gift, because it gets us thinking seriously about death, rather than just ignoring it. It's difficult to ignore or put off our questions/fears about death, when it shows up in the headlines every single day.¹⁰ Many of us wake up each morning asking ourselves: I wonder what the death toll is going to be today? I wonder how many cases of COVID-19 there are in my area now? According to the data I've seen this weekend: Globally, there are over 1.7 million (1,715,143) cases of COVID-19. The U.S. accounts for over half a million of those (501,680) cases.¹¹ That means that almost 1/3 of the cases of COVID-19, are in the U.S.; we're now a world leader, in a way that we don't want to be. The global death toll has now reached a little over 100,000 (103,874). For the United States, we are approaching 20,000 deaths (18,771). We're not at 20,000 yet, but we will be soon. Of course, these are only the cases that have been reported and confirmed. Most of us are realizing by now, that the numbers are probably much higher than these statistics. Now, to be fair, hundreds of thousands of people have recovered from COVID-19, but certainly not everyone has.

There's a famous author named, C.S. Lewis, who once wrote an article titled, "Learning in Wartime." Although COVID-19 is not the same as war, in some ways, it does feel very similar to wartimes. Here's what Lewis wrote: "What does war do to death? [Or you and I might ask, "What does COVID-19 do to death?"] It certainly does not make [death] more frequent; 100% of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased. It can put several deaths earlier, but I hardly suppose that that is what we fear... Yet [it] does do something to death. It forces us to remember it... [it] makes death real

¹⁰ "Underneath our fears about COVID-19 crawls the pervasive fear of death, which enslaves most of the world, often subtly, for their whole lives." *What Courage Might Corona unleash?* by Marshall Segal, March 15, 2020 at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-courage-might-corona-unleash>

¹¹ See <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> and www.wikipedia.org.

to us....”¹² In other words, “The reality of death has not changed. What’s changed... is that now we are consciously considering what will inevitably happen to each and every one of us.”¹³

Here’s another encouragement from God’s Word. 2 Timothy 1:10 says, “but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Now that Jesus has conquered death, we need not fear it. We need not fear COVID-19 or anything else that threatens death! Because we have a hope that lies beyond the grave. Easter morning celebrates the empty tomb. He is not here; He is risen! When we place our faith in Jesus, we don’t need to fear the grave. Through Jesus we can conquer death and live a new life. If you’d like to learn more about following Jesus, I would urge you to join our online class called “Christianity Explored.” There is a link to it on our website.¹⁴



Here’s how the Christian Faith works: we need to put our faith in Jesus. This means putting our full and complete trust in Him. Asking Him to save us and letting Him be the Lord of our lives. A good way to express faith in Jesus is through a prayer like this one: “Dear God, thank You for showing Your love to me by sending Your Son, Jesus. I admit that I have sinned by not living Your way. Today, I turn from my sin. I put my trust in Jesus’ death and resurrection to make me right with You. Please forgive me so that I can have a new life and begin a relationship with You. I choose to follow You as the Lord and leader of everything that I do. Amen.”

Conquering death is all about the new life that we can find through following Jesus! Our Heavenly Father has had a plan for death all along. In fact, He still has a plan. His plan was for Jesus to conquer death! And, now that He has, God’s plan is for you to conquer death as well!

This sermon was preached via livestream at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on April 12, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

¹² From C.S. Lewis’s *Learning in Wartime*, quoted in the article *What Courage Might Corona unleash?* by Marshall Segal, March 15, 2020 at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-courage-might-corona-unleash>

¹³ Marshall Segal, *What Courage Might Corona unleash?* March 15, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-courage-might-corona-unleash>

¹⁴ <https://efcbemidji.org/event/1787366-2020-04-12-christianity-explored-friday-sessions/>