Lesson 26

To keep the study materials brief enough to be usable, this chapter will focus on the verses from Matthew.

Matthew 26

Verse 47: This “great multitude” came from the temple priests, so it may have been the temple police rather than a mere mob.

Verses 48–49: Just as it is today for many, a kiss on the cheek seems to have been a standard greeting, but it seems not merely to have been that. Ulrich Luz says that in first-century Palestine the kiss was a sign of solidarity and reconciliation, and so “one would hardly be able to say that the kiss of greeting was a completely normal and thus meaningless ritual in the Jewish society of that day.”¹ For two millennia writers have taken this kiss to be the symbol of betrayal. The only alternative voice seems to have been that of Origen, who recognized that Judas was neither fully good nor fully evil, and so he probably vacillated in his feelings for the Savior.²

Verse 50: Does Jesus mean it when he refers to Judas as “friend”? Is he making a point by using a term of address that contrasts with “brother,” the usual form of address

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between the disciples? Or is he perhaps being ironic? Could he be offering Judas an opportunity to repent?

Is Jesus really asking Judas why he has come? What is the point of Jesus’s question? Some translations take this as a statement, “Do what you have come for,” rather than a question. Which way of reading what Jesus says makes most sense to you? Why?

Verses 51–54: John tells us that Peter cut off the slave’s ear. I once heard a reader say that this sounds like someone who doesn’t know how to use a sword in battle has attacked the servant, trying to hit him in the head, but only striking a glancing blow and cutting of the servant’s ear. What do you think of that possibility?

Why doesn’t Matthew tell us who cut off the ear? In John 18:10 we learn both the name of the swordsman, Peter, and the name of the slave, Malchus.

Why does Jesus reject the use of violence to protect himself? Compare what he says in verse 52 with what he says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:39).

In verse 53 we are told that, had he wanted to, Jesus could have summoned almost 70,000 angels to his defense (compare Matthew 4:5–7), but he refuses. What are we who wage war to make of Jesus’s pacifism?

Jesus’s explanation for why he doesn’t call on heavenly defenders seems strange to me: “If I were to do so, scripture would not be fulfilled.” For this to be a compelling reason, we also have to assume that all scripture must be fulfilled. However, that assumption doesn’t seem to carry very much
moral weight. Scripture might prophesy of Judas’s betrayal, but if it does, that doesn’t absolve Judas of his crime. He can’t appear before the Father and say, “I just did what had to be done,” can he? Can you explain this puzzle?

Peter, and presumably the other disciples, was willing to use force to defend Jesus. How do you think he responded when Jesus rejected his use of force?

If we put together Peter’s response when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, his insistence that he will go where Jesus goes, and this incident, we have a picture of someone who seems not to understand what is happening, perhaps even someone who is confused. Might that lack of understanding or that confusion help explain why Peter later betrays Jesus? Does that teach us anything about our own lives and situations?

**Verses 55–56:** Jesus asks why they have taken him at night rather than publicly when they could easily have taken him when he was in the temple. What is the answer to Jesus’s question?

Notice that to say Jesus sat in the temple is to say that he was a teacher there. We could translate the last part of verse 55 this way: “I taught daily in the temple—with you there—and you didn’t arrest me.”

**Verses 57–58:** To understand what happens in the story of Jesus’s arrest and crucifixion, it is necessary to understand something about the political situation among the Jews in Jerusalem. Though the Pharisees had strong opinions about the law, they did not have the authority to enforce religious law. If you will recall, that is because the name *Pharisee* designated a person who was a member of a particular sect and
political party, not a person who necessarily had political power. Only the temple priests could enforce religious law. “Scribes and elders” probably refers to the duties of particular temple priests.

Why does Matthew tell us that Peter followed but not tell us Peter’s story until later?

**Verses 59–68:** What does verse 61 mean when it says that many false witnesses came but the officers found none? Remember that the law of Moses required two witnesses for any charge. Finally two witnesses come who say that Jesus has said he will tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days. (Compare Jeremiah 26:1–19.) The threat to destroy the temple would be a serious crime, so this is a serious charge.

Jesus initially doesn’t answer their charge, as we can tell by the high priest’s question in verse 62: “Don’t you have anything to say?” Why is Jesus silent? (Compare Matthew 12:19 and Isaiah 42:2.)

In verse 63 the high priest challenges Jesus to take an oath regarding whether he is the Messiah. In verse 64 Jesus answers the high priest’s question: first, he as much as says that he is the Messiah; then he adds a prophecy (using the language of Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13) concerning the Messiah. It doesn’t seem to have been blasphemy to claim to be the Messiah. Indeed, a number of previous people had claimed to be the Messiah, and several would do so after Jesus’s crucifixion. So how can the high priest accuse Jesus of blasphemy? Tearing one’s clothing was prescribed by Jewish law as a judge’s sign that he has just witnessed blasphemy.
Verses 69–75: Why does each of the Gospel writers tell this story about Peter, the chief apostle and first president of the early Church? Most interpreters have not seen this as a simple betrayal. Instead, they have seen Peter as an Everyman. Like us, he follows the Lord and shares the Lord’s suffering, though at a distance and though he is fearful and sometimes falls. What lesson is there for us in his betrayal?

Matthew 27

We will look at verses 1–2 when we come to verse 11.

Verses 3–10: Matthew deals with two betrayals, one after the other: first Peter’s and then Judas’s. It looks like he places one against the other so that we can compare them. What is the difference between them?

How sincere do you think Judas’s grief was (verses 3–4)? What evidence do you find here for your opinion?

What do you make of the response to Judas of the chief priests and elders (verse 4)? Why do you think they are so cold?

Who do you think is the more responsible party in this crime, Judas or the chief priests and scribes?

Though Acts 1:17–19 deals with Judas’s death, Matthew is the only Gospel writer who does. Why does he do so? Why do the other writers ignore it?

What does the chief priests’ scrupulousness about how they deal with Judas’s silver suggest about them (verse 6)? How is Matthew portraying them?
Though verse 9 says that it is quoting from Jeremiah, it seems to be quoting from Zechariah (11:12–13). So what? Why is a scripture reference important to Matthew, whether it comes from Jeremiah or Zechariah?

**Verses 11–14 (and 1–2):** What accusation does Pilate seem to be asking about? Is that the same charge that the high priest was dealing with or a new charge? If it is a new charge, what is going on?

What does “You said it” mean in response to Pilate’s question?

What accusation do you think the chief priests and elders made in verse 12? Is it the charge of blasphemy or something else? Did it have anything to do with the cleansing of the temple?

Why does Jesus refuse to answer their charges? There is evidence that the high priest was in Pilate’s debt. The previous governor of Judea had appointed four high priests during his tenure. (The Romans, like many kings, demanded the right to appoint the religious authority.) Pilate has appointed only one. Does this relation suggest anything about what happened at Jesus’s trial?

It is important not to assume that Jesus’s trial and execution was something carried out by “the Jews” as we understand that term. Charges were brought against Jesus by some Jewish temple and community leaders of the first century, who appear to have conspired to deliver Jesus into Roman hands as a rebel. Jesus’s execution was ordered by the Roman governor, Pilate, and carried out by his soldiers. However, most Jews of the time, even most of those living in Je-
rusalem, probably knew little about the trial and execution, and few of those who knew about it were involved in bringing it about. A great deal of death and horror has resulted from the charge that “the Jews” crucified Christ. Christians used that charge as an excuse to kill and oppress Jews for centuries, but the charge makes no sense, not only because children are not responsible for the sins of their ancestors (a corollary of Article of Faith 2), but also because few of their ancestors had anything to do with Christ’s death.

**Verses 15–26:** The name Barabbas means “son of the father,” and Barabbas’s given name was “Jesus”: Jesus Barabbas. Why is that name important to this story?

Mark identifies Barabbas as a zealot, someone who believed that Palestine had to be purified of Gentile influence—and, for many, even of Gentile presence—and who believed that the Jews were justified in using violence to do so. Today we would call the zealots terrorists. Is there a parallel between what Barabbas was doing and what Jesus did?

What does Matthew mean when he says that the priests had delivered Jesus to Pilate “for envy” (verse 18)?

Jesus did nothing to prevent the high priest’s guards from taking him, knowing that he must be tried and executed in order to fulfill the scriptures and to work the atonement. Why, then, did the Lord give Pilate’s wife a dream by which she learned that Jesus was innocent? (I am assuming that the dream came from the Lord.)

How culpable for Jesus’s death was Pilate? Did he know that Jesus was innocent? If he did, why did he deliver him
to be executed (verse 26)? If he did not, why did he wash his hands (verse 24)?

Notice that Pilate does not really conduct a trial: he hears the accusation, asks Jesus about that accusation, offers to free either Jesus or Barabbas, and delivers Jesus for execution when the crowd chooses Barabbas. He questions no witnesses and delivers no verdict. Scourging (verse 26) was the first step in execution by crucifixion. But if this wasn’t a real trial, what was it?

**Verses 27–31:** Roman soldiers wore a scarlet cloak, so it seems the guards have placed one of their robes on him. Long thorns seem to have been used as kindling for fires; they may have woven those thorns into a wreath to use as a mock crown. Why did the soldiers mock Jesus when it is unlikely that they knew him and probably knew little about him?

**Verses 32–34:** Roman soldiers had the right to impress anyone into temporary labor. The upright of the cross was permanently installed on the execution site, and the condemned were required to carry the transverse beam to the site.

We are not sure where Golgotha was; there are at least two possible sites. It seems that it was the custom for Jewish women to give condemned prisoners a narcotic drink to lessen their pain. Why does Jesus refuse the drink (verse 34)?

**Verses 35–44:** Roman citizens were forbidden by law from being executed by crucifixion; it was reserved for slaves, bandits, and rebels. What does that tell us about how Jesus was viewed by the Romans? How is that relevant to our understanding of what he did?
One of the privileges of the execution squad was to divide the garments of the condemned among themselves. Those executed were entirely nude, part of the humiliation of the execution.

Though no charge was specified by Pilate in the trial, some charge had to be made to justify the execution. Matthew tells us that the charge was placed on a placard over Jesus’s head (verse 37). What did the title on the placard mean to Pilate and to the executioners? What does the execution of Jesus between two thieves tell us about how they understood the placard? What does the title mean to us?

Those in the crowd who taunt Christ do not hide their reasons for his execution (verses 39–40). What is their charge against him?

How do the priests, scribes, and elders understand what it means to be the king of Israel (verses 42–43).

As we have seen them do before, the priests say more than they know: “he saved others; himself he cannot save” (verse 42). In verse 43 the priests refer to Psalm 22:9.

Verses 45–50: The sixth hour was noon, and the ninth hour was mid-afternoon. Is the darkness referred to in verse 45 literal or figurative? (Compare Luke 22:53.)

The words that Jesus cries out in verse 46 are the first line of Psalm 22. The last words of Jesus mentioned by John (John 19:30) may be from the last line of that psalm (verse 31: “he hath done” can also be translated “it is done”). What do you make of that connection between Jesus’s words and the psalm?
A common drink for the poor of Jesus’s time was vinegar mixed with water. This is probably what someone from the crowd is offering Jesus. (See Psalm 69:22.) “Yielded up the ghost” or “let go of the spirit” was an idiomatic expression meaning “died.”

**Verses 51–56:** What does tearing the veil of the temple signify?

The dead of Israel recognized Jesus, and the Roman soldiers recognized Jesus. What point is Matthew making by telling us about these people who recognize that Jesus is the Son of God? Whom might he want us to compare them to?

**Verses 57–61:** Mark tells us that Joseph of Arimathaea was “an honourable counsellor.” “A respectable member of the city council” is another possible translation. Besides his concern as one of Jesus’s disciples, he probably wished to ensure that the Mosaic law was followed, which forbade allowing the body of one executed to remain on the cross overnight (Deuteronomy 21:23).

**Verses 62–66:** On what day would the events of verses 62–66 have occurred? What is remarkable about the fact that the priests and Pharisees came to see Pilate on that day?

Mark tells us that they remember that Jesus has prophesied his resurrection. Do the disciples? What does this tell us about the priests and the Pharisees?

Given what the priests say here, how do you think they explained the empty tomb?