

# Title: Matthew 26-27: The Passion Narrative

**Author:** Dr. Craig Keener

**Session 18**

**Sponsor:** Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

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## Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Craig Keener explores the Passion narrative in Matthew 26-27, demonstrating its historical plausibility and deep theological significance. Through first-century context, Keener highlights how Jesus' actions deliberately provoked his execution, analyzing key moments such as the anointing at Bethany, the Last Supper, and the Gethsemane betrayal. He contrasts the absolute devotion of the anonymous woman with the failures and political expedience of the disciples, the Jewish priestly aristocracy, and Pontius Pilate. Ultimately, the source frames the crucifixion as a historical reality and a calculated sacrificial atonement that fulfills biblical prophecy.

## Outline:

### I. Introduction to Matthew 26-27

- **A. Introduction to the Passion and Resurrection Narratives**
  1. Final chapters serve as the theological and narrative climax of **Matthew's Gospel**.
  2. Focus of Lecture 18 is on the historical and theological elements of **Jesus' suffering**.
- **B. Historical Plausibility of Jesus' Foreknowledge and Provocation of His Death**
  1. Jesus' foreknowledge of his death is historically plausible because **his actions provoked it**.
  2. Public actions, such as overturning tables in the Temple and challenging the priestly aristocracy, made execution inevitable without military resistance or flight.

3. Parallel historical figures: **Joshua ben Hananiah** challenged the Temple and was handed over to the Roman governor by the Sadducees, illustrating standard first-century Roman-Jewish interaction.

- **C. Credibility of the Passion Narrative**

1. Standard Roman legal practice was reactive, prosecuting individuals brought forward by local elites.
2. Earliest Jerusalem church traditions: Match sequences in **Mark and Paul (1 Corinthians)**, with references back to early oral traditions.
3. Linguistic and naming features: Use of geographic identifiers (e.g., **Simon of Cyrene, Mary of Magdala**) rather than patronymics, reflecting the diverse origins of the early Jerusalem church community.

## II. The Value of Jesus: Contrast of Devotion (Matthew 26:6-16)

- **A. The Lavish Devotion of the Anonymous Woman**

1. Anoints Jesus with an extremely expensive **alabaster flask of nard** (likely imported from India).
2. Historically interpreted as a family heirloom representing immense wealth.
3. Jesus declares her act of love will be told globally in memory of her, outlasting the fame of ancient poets like **Ovid**.
4. Identified in the Gospel of John as **Mary**, sister of Martha and Lazarus.

- **B. The Failure of the Disciples**

1. Male disciples complain about the financial waste, suggesting the oil should have been sold to feed the poor.
2. Misunderstand the priority of Jesus' immediate presence and imminent burial over standard charitable duties.

- **C. The Betrayal of Judas Iscariot**

1. Judas represents those who follow Jesus for **personal gain**.

2. Agrees to betray Jesus for **thirty pieces of silver**—the biblical price of a slave (Exodus 21:32).

### III. The Meaning of Jesus' Death: The Last Supper (Matthew 26:17-30)

- **A. Bedrock Traditions of the Lord's Supper**

1. Historically early tradition attested in Paul's writings (**1 Corinthians 11**) using technical terminology for oral transmission ("received" and "delivered").
2. Pervasive Aramaic oral traditions and deep **Passover allusions** point to early Judean origin.

- **B. First-Century Banquet and Passover Customs**

1. Participants reclined on their left elbows, leaving their right hands free to eat.
2. High-status guests reclined next to the host; the beloved disciple was to Jesus' right, and **Judas** was likely to his left.
3. Sitting was for rabbinic study; reclining was strictly reserved for banquets like the Passover.

- **C. The Sacrificial Theology of the Meal**

1. "Flesh and blood poured out" is explicitly **sacrificial language** representing covenantal atonement.
2. The bread as body reflects Passover Haggadah declarations ("this is the bread of affliction") where symbolic representation is central.

- **D. Cultural Contextualization and the Corinthian Failure**

1. In Roman Corinth, banquets segregated and ranked guests by social status.
2. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for importing class divisions into the **Lord's Supper**, reminding them that failing to treat others with equality shames the body of Christ.
3. Christ's death is a **ransom for many**, turning away divine wrath and atoning for humanity's sins.

### IV. Gethsemane: Anguish and Abandonment (Matthew 26:31-46)

- **A. Jesus' Anguish in the Garden**

1. Jesus experiences profound distress and prays for the "**cup**" of the cross to pass.
2. The narrative meets the "**criterion of embarrassment**", as the early church would not invent a vulnerable Jesus whose will differed from the Father's.

- **B. The Disciples' Slumber**

1. Jesus asks his closest disciples (Peter, James, John) to watch and pray, but they fall asleep three times.
2. This is deeply shameful in a **Passover context**, where Jews traditionally stayed awake late to discuss God's redemptive works.
3. Foreshadows the total abandonment of Jesus by his followers.

## **V. The Arrest of Jesus (Matthew 26:47-56)**

- **A. Judas' Betrayal via Greeting**

1. Uses a kiss (**phileo**), a standard sign of respect/greeting, as a deceitful tool of betrayal.
2. Temple guards (Levite police under the chief priests) needed Judas to identify Jesus in the dark of Gethsemane.

- **B. Peter's Violent Reaction and Jesus' Rebuke**

1. Peter cuts off the ear of **Malchus**, the high priest's servant.
2. Jesus rebukes the use of violence: "Put up your sword."
3. Jesus declares he could summon **twelve legions of angels** (over 72,000, far outnumbering Roman forces in the region) but chooses to submit to scripture.

- **C. The Disciples' Flight**

1. Disciples abandon Jesus and flee.
2. Highly embarrassing and historically plausible; not a detail the early church would invent.

## **VI. The Trial before the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:57-68)**

- **A. Historical Context of the Sanhedrin Trial**

1. The **Mishnah** (written c. 220 AD) reflects idealized, later Pharisaic laws that the first-century Sadducean priestly aristocracy did not follow.
2. This hearing was a preliminary inquiry held at night in the high priest's home, violating several Pharisaic protocols (night trial, lack of notice, no execution of false witnesses).

- **B. The Corruption of the Priestly Aristocracy**

1. Confirmed by contemporary historical accounts in **Josephus** and the **Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran)**.
2. High priests in this period were appointed by Romans and known for bribery, violence, and intense factional infighting.

- **C. The Condemnation for Blasphemy and High Treason**

1. Jesus breaks his silence and claims to be the exalted **Son of Man** (blending Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14).
2. High priest **Caiaphas** tears his robes, and the council declares Jesus guilty of blasphemy.
3. While biblical law prescribed stoning, they frame the charge as claiming to be a king—making Jesus guilty of **high treason (sedition)** under Roman law, which required Roman execution.

## **VII. Repentance and the Chain of Guilt (Matthew 27:1-10)**

- **A. Two Responses to Betrayal**

1. **Peter's Denial:** Denies Jesus three times under duress in the high priest's courtyard (betrayed by his Galilean accent), but responds with weeping and sincere repentance.
2. **Judas' Despair:** Repents of betraying innocent blood but hangs himself (a dishonorable suicide reminiscent of Ahithophel), showing despair rather than restorative repentance.

- **B. The Chain of Guilt and Innocent Blood**

1. Everyone attempts to pass blame: Judas, the chief priests, and Pontius Pilate.

2. **Deuteronomy 21** outlines corporate responsibility for innocent blood, reinforcing both individual and societal guilt.
3. Hypocrisy of the priests: They refuse to put the returned blood money into the Temple treasury for ritual purity reasons, despite orchestrating the murder of an innocent man.

## VIII. The Roman Trial before Pontius Pilate (Matthew 27:11-26)

### • A. Historical Character of Pontius Pilate

1. Historically attested by **Tacitus (Annals 15:44)**, Philo, Josephus, and local inscriptions.
2. Pilate was of the **equestrian (knight)** class, lower status than typical governors, and politically vulnerable.
3. Represented as a bully who was also a coward when faced with organized local opposition or threats to his standing.

### • B. The Trial and Sentencing

1. Roman law required condemnation for a defendant who refused to offer a self-defense; Jesus remains largely silent.
2. Pilate attempts to release Jesus by offering the crowd a choice between him and **Barabbas**.
3. The Jerusalem crowd, easily swayed by the chief priests, chooses Barabbas and demands Jesus' crucifixion.

### • C. Scourging and Mockery

1. Jesus is scourged using a Roman **flagellum** (leather whip with bone/glass), which tore flesh and laid bones bare.
2. Roman soldiers mock Jesus' claim to kingship: dress him in a faded scarlet/purple cloak, weave a **crown of thorns** (with spikes pointing outward), and give him a bamboo scepter.
3. Cruel irony: While they mock him as "King of the Jews," he is the true king of the universe.

## IX. The Way of the Cross and Crucifixion (Matthew 27:27-32)

### • A. The Physical Burden

1. Condemned criminals typically carried the horizontal beam of the cross (***patibulum***) to the permanent upright stake (***palus***).

- **B. Simon of Cyrene**

1. Due to physical weakness from the scourging, the Romans draft a bystander, **Simon of Cyrene**, to carry the cross.
2. Irony: Jesus had commanded his disciples to "take up your cross and follow me," yet in his final hour, none of his disciples were present, and a stranger was forced to carry it.