

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 18, Matthew 26-27

6-min. Video Overview

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The story of Jesus' final days is one of the most famous in history, right? But beyond the story you think you know, what was really going on? What was the human drama in the historical context of it all? Well, today, we're going to dig into that, using the analysis of historian Dr. Craig Keener to piece together what really happened. So yeah, we're not just retelling an old story. Think of this more like a historical investigation.

We're going to look at the motivations, the ancient customs, and the intense political pressures that all crashed together in this one pivotal moment. So our story really kicks off just before the arrest, where we see two completely opposite ways that Jesus' life was valued, happening at almost the exact same time. Okay, so check out this contrast.

It is just wild. On one side you have this woman who pours out an entire jar of incredibly expensive perfume on Jesus. Now, this wasn't just a small gesture.

We're talking about what was likely a family's entire life savings, a fortune in a bottle spent in a single lavish moment of love. And on the other side, one of his own, Judas, is literally next door, negotiating a price to sell him out. And this was the price: 30 pieces of silver.

Now it might not sound like a huge amount of money, and it wasn't really. But the number itself, that number carried a devastating symbolic weight. And that's where the deep insult lies.

See, Judas didn't just betray his teacher. He put a price tag on him. And that price was the legal compensation for an accidentally killed slave.

The whole transaction was just dripping with contempt. It reduced a man, some called a king, to the value of property. All right, let's move from that betrayal into the room where they're having the last supper.

This wasn't just any dinner. It was a Passover Seder, a deeply traditional and sacred Jewish meal that Jesus was about to turn completely on its head. To really get the vibe of this event, you have to picture how they ate.

They weren't sitting in chairs around a table as we would. For a formal banquet like this, guests would recline on couches, propped up on their left elbow. This arrangement meant that to talk to the person next to you, you'd naturally lean back, kind of resting on their chest.

This little detail explains that famous image of the beloved disciple leaning on Jesus. It shows this incredible physical closeness and trust right at the very moment betrayal is in the air. And here's where it gets truly radical.

During a normal Passover, the host holds up the bread and says, this is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate. It was a symbol of the past. But Jesus takes that tradition and just transforms it.

He holds up the bread and says it is his body. He takes the cup of wine, which symbolized the sacrificial blood from the first Passover, and says it is his blood for a totally new deal, a new covenant. He was using the most powerful language they had to explain that his own death was going to be a sacrifice.

From the warmth and sacred meaning of that last meal, the mood just completely plummets. The story moves into the darkness of a garden, Gethsemane, where Jesus has to face his fate, and where his friends are about to fail him big time. This prayer is just so raw, so incredibly human.

The cup here is a common metaphor for suffering. He's not some stoic hero here. He is in agony, asking if there's any other way out of this.

But in the end, he submits. You know, a lot of historians actually find this detail really believable, because why would the early church invent a story that showed their leaders struggling so much? And in this moment of just gut-wrenching distress, he asks his three best friends, Peter, James, and John, for one thing: just stay awake with me. And they can't do it.

He comes back and finds them sleeping. Not once, but over and over. At his most vulnerable moment, he is completely and utterly alone.

So when the guards finally get there, led by Judas, the disciples react exactly how you'd expect them to, with violence. Peter whips out a sword and attacks, slicing off a guy's ear. But Jesus shuts it down immediately.

He rebukes Peter, totally rejecting this whole idea of fighting a spiritual battle with worldly weapons. It's a huge, defining moment. And Jesus makes it crystal clear that this is a choice.

He tells them he could just ask his father, and boom, more than twelve legions of angels would appear. A Roman legion was about 6,000 soldiers. So you're talking over 70,000 angelic troops.

Way more military power than Rome had in the entire region. But he says that's not the point. That's not the mission.

From the garden, Jesus is hauled off to a series of hearings, the first ones before the Jewish high priest Caiaphas, and the council known as the Sanhedrin. And honestly, it's less of a trial and more of a political checkbox they need to tick. This whole hearing pretty much broke all the rules for a fair trial, even by the standards of the day.

Later Jewish writings make it clear. You couldn't hold capital trials at night, or in a private home, or on a holy day. And if you caught witnesses lying, they were supposed to get the death penalty themselves.

None of that happened here. This was a rushed, predetermined sham. The takeaway is pretty clear.

This was not about finding justice. It was a political move to get rid of a problem. For most of this so-called trial, Jesus is completely silent.

But then the high priest puts the question to him directly. Are you the Christ, the son of the blessed? And Jesus finally gives him an answer. I am.

And then he adds that they will see the son of man sitting at God's right hand. For Caiaphas, that's the gotcha moment. It's blasphemy, a crime punishable by death.

But there was a problem. The Sanhedrin could find him guilty of blasphemy, sure, but they didn't have the authority under Roman occupation to actually execute him. For that, they needed the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

And Pilate couldn't care less about some internal Jewish religious argument. And this is where it gets politically brilliant in a terrible way. It all comes down to translation.

Caiaphas knew that the Hebrew word Messiah and the Greek word Christos both meant anointed king. For Jews, it was a religious title, but for the Romans, anyone claiming to be a king without Caesar's okay was a revolutionary, a traitor. And just like that, blasphemy becomes sedition.

It was the perfect charge to force Pilate to act. Now, while all of this is unfolding, two of his disciples have to face what they've done. And their reactions could not be more different.

This moment shows two very different roads you can take after a massive failure. Peter, the guy who swore he'd die for Jesus, denies even knowing him three times just to save his own skin. And when he realizes what he's done, he just breaks down and weeps.

That's an act of repentance. Judas feels bad too. He even tries to give the money back.

But his regret turns into pure despair. And he takes his own life. A deeply dishonorable death.

One man's regret led him back. The other's led to ruin. It's a powerful look at grief versus despair that sees no way out.

Pilate, even though he seems to think Jesus is innocent, eventually just caves to the political pressure and sentences him to the most brutal execution the Romans had: crucifixion. Before the execution, the Roman soldiers have some cruel fun. They're mocking the very charge that's getting him killed: King of the Jews.

So they throw a faded red soldier's cloak on him like a royal robe. They weave a crown out of a thorny plant and jam it onto his head. They stick a reed in his hand like it's a scepter.

And then they kneel down and mockingly worship him. Every single symbol of royalty is twisted into an instrument of pain. And here we come to the final, crushing irony of the whole thing.

Jesus had once told his followers that if they wanted to follow him, they had to take up their cross. But now, weakened from being whipped and forced to carry the heavy crossbeam to his own execution, he falls. And where are his disciples? They're gone.

They all ran. So the Roman soldiers just do what they always did. They grab some random guy out of the crowd, a man named Simon, and force him to carry it.

Which leaves us with the giant paradox at the center of this whole story. He was executed by the most powerful empire in the world for the crime of being a powerless king. So how on earth did this figure, abandoned by his friends and mocked all the way to his death, become the subject of a global movement that would one day call him king of kings? That right there is the question at the very heart of The Passion.