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Matthew 27:1 - 27:8



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this presentation, Steve Gregg discusses the details of Matthew 27:1-8, which follows the arrest and trial of Jesus. He points out that the Sanhedrin needed Roman approval to sentence Jesus to death, leading them to gather and throw down pieces of silver in the temple. Gregg notes that the account of Judas Iscariot's death differs in some ways from other Gospel narratives, and suggests that the disciples likely discussed and shared information about what happened. Finally, he addresses a seeming inconsistency in the quotation attributed to Jeremiah in Matthew 27:9, which appears to actually come from the prophet Zechariah.

Transcript

We now turn to Matthew chapter 27 to continue our studies through the life of Christ. And Jesus in the previous chapter was arrested and taken to the high priest and to the Sanhedrin, where they attempted to find fault with him and find some crime in him for which they could accuse him and sentence him to death. Unfortunately for them, they couldn't find anything wrong with him, and so they finally got him to make a statement about himself, which though there would be no legal precedent for calling such a statement blasphemy, they called it blasphemy, and in doing so found in him what they considered to be cause worthy of death.

And so they condemned him to die. And we read in chapter 27, verse 1 of Matthew, When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. And when they had bound him, they led him away and delivered him to Pontius Pilate, the governor.

And so he was now taken to Pontius Pilate. Now why was he taken there? If they had already found him guilty of blasphemy, in their opinion, and felt he's worthy to die, why would this court then go to talk to Pontius Pilate? Well, the reason is because the Jewish court was a puppet government, in a sense, in Israel. They were given a certain amount of authority to rule in matters of law in Israel, but they were not really given full authority.

The Romans had conquered that region years earlier, about 70 years or 100 years earlier than this, actually. And the Romans, although they gave the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court, a great deal of authority, they did not allow them to have the authority to execute people. The matter of executing a criminal was left to the prerogative of the Roman court, and there was a Roman governor present in Jerusalem to decide those issues.

Now, since the Sanhedrin decided they wanted to kill Jesus, they needed to get the approval of the Romans for this. They could decide among themselves that on grounds that they deemed adequate, they felt he deserved to die, but that was not enough. They had to convince the Romans that Jesus deserved to die.

Now, Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor in the area, and therefore they had to persuade him to crucify Jesus. Now, there's a problem with this, of course, because the grounds upon which the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus, though trumped up and false, nonetheless, they were on the basis of blasphemy. That is blasphemy against the God of Israel.

Now, the Roman governor could hardly be expected to get excited about such a charge. What would he care? He probably blasphemed the God of Israel on a regular basis. He wouldn't care that a man blasphemed the God of Israel, and therefore they could not bring those charges against Jesus before Pontius Pilate and hope to get what they wanted.

Pontius Pilate would never condemn a man to die just because he allegedly blasphemed God, but they needed to bring some other kind of charges, and that's why they met together this morning. When it says, When the morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. This is not just summarizing what had happened the night before.

What happened the night before was they exhausted the testimony of the witnesses and got nowhere. Finally, the high priest cross-examined Jesus and persuaded Jesus to say something that they were willing to call blasphemy, and the court had announced that he was worthy of death, but that's not the same thing as getting him killed. They had to get together again in the morning to try to drum up some other kind of charge that would impress the Roman governor that Jesus must be put to death.

They came up with a bunch of false charges, as it turns out, but we'll read about that a little later on. Now, as they took him to Pontius Pilate, we have an aside given us here about Judas, who, of course, was the betrayer of Jesus. And in verse 3, it says, When Judas, his betrayer, seeing that he had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders.

Saying, I have sinned by betraying innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? You see to it. Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed and went

and hanged himself.

But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood. And they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field to bury strangers in. Therefore that field has been called the field of blood to this day.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of him who was priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me. Now, this story of Judas's death and of the subsequent disposition of the money that he threw on the temple floor and the purchase of the field and the fulfillment of the scripture and so forth is actually one of the passages in Matthew that has more difficulties associated with it than almost any other. And the reason is because we have, for one thing, we have another account of what happened to Judas.

And it sounds very different than this. It's found in Acts chapter 1, and in the upper room when the apostles were waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter decided to suggest and to act upon the suggestion that they replace Judas, who is now dead, and to find another apostle to replace him. And this is discussed, and in the context of the discussion in Acts chapter 1, there is mention of why Judas had to be replaced, why he was no longer with them, what had happened to him.

And it's found in Acts 1, 18 and 19, it says, Now this man, meaning Judas, purchased a field with the wages of iniquity, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his entrails gushed out. And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem, so that the field is called in their own language, Akaldama, that means the field of blood. Now, what do we learn of Judas here? We learn that he purchased a field, he fell headlong, apparently, into that field, his bowels, his entrails gushed out there, and because of that gory thing, the inhabitants of Jerusalem referred to it as the field of blood, Akaldama.

Now, that differs in quite a few details from what we've read in Matthew, because Matthew tells us, first of all, it does not tell us that Judas bought the field, it tells us that he cast the money down in the temple, and went out and hanged himself. Now, he hanged himself, that's very different sounding than falling headlong and his bowels gushing out. The field was actually purchased by the chief priests, not by Judas himself, although in Acts chapter 1 it says this man purchased a field with the wages of his iniquity.

We read even a different reason for the field being called the field of blood. In Acts chapter 1 it is said to be called the field of blood because Judas' bowels gushed out there. In Matthew chapter 27 it says it is called the field of blood because they used blood money to buy it, and a place to bury strangers in.

Now, these are three very significant differences between the story of Judas and his final end, as given by Matthew, and that given in Acts chapter 1. Now, let me just say, first of all, that Acts chapter 1, in telling that story, Luke is the author of Acts, and it may be that he is giving these comments about Judas' death, however they occur in the midst of a monologue by Peter, and it may be that Peter is the one giving these details in Acts chapter 1. It is not clear whether Luke or Peter is giving them, because in that particular section, Luke is quoting Peter. Peter was giving his suggestion that they should replace Judas, and in the midst of that suggestion is this little story about what happened to Judas. It is possible that it is Peter's words, or it is possible that Luke is interjecting an explanation for the reader, but in any case, the story of what happened to Judas in Acts either came from Peter or from Luke, the author of Acts, whereas the account in Matthew came from Matthew, one of the twelve disciples.

Now, we do notice there are differences here, but before we conclude that we have contradictions, which is what some people hasten to conclude, and many people are eager to find contradictions in the Bible, we need to be reasonable. We need to say, first of all, does a contradiction exist here? Now, to simply say two accounts give different details does not necessarily mean they contradict each other. A contradiction exists only when two accounts cannot both be true.

If it is possible for both accounts to be true, then there is no contradiction. Secondly, if there is a contradiction, we have to assume that either Matthew or Luke was mistaken and had the wrong information about what happened to Judas. Now, let's think about the likelihood of that.

How likely is it that one of these two men would have the wrong information? Let's say one of them told the story the way it was, and the other one had it all wrong and told it a different way because he was mistaken. Well, think about this. We're not talking about some abstract historical character that they're talking about.

They're talking about someone whom they knew. Judas Iscariot had known not only Jesus, but he had known the other disciples. In fact, he had been part of their group.

He had traveled with them. He had lived with them for more than two and a half years. And since this is so, these people were very close friends with Judas.

Remember, they didn't know in advance that he was going to betray Jesus. He was just one of their friends. He was just one of the guys in their company.

And he was a trusted friend. He was one that they'd lived with, slept with, eaten with, traveled with, talked with for years. Judas was, in fact, one of their closest friends, as the apostolic group were very tight in terms of time spent together and going through things together.

Now, suppose you were in their position. Suppose you were a single individual, let's say, and you went on some kind of an outreach for a couple of years on the mission field or something. And your team consisted of 12 workers.

And you worked together with those people day in, day out, month in, month out for several years. And then one of them died. One of them was killed.

Do you think it would take very long for the news of how that person died to be spread throughout the group? I mean, wouldn't everyone be talking about it? If someone who was close to you died, wouldn't you and the others that were close to him be talking about it quite a bit? For a while, it'd be all they'd talk about. And whatever story circulated would be shared by all. Now, we have to put ourselves in the disciples' position.

These people knew Judas, at least Peter did and Matthew did. Luke did not, but Luke knew people who knew him. Luke got his information from the other apostles whom he knew personally.

And these people would not have conflicting stories among themselves as to what happened to Judas, especially not at the late date that these accounts were actually written down. And I don't take a late date particularly of the writing of these Gospels, but I do believe that it would probably be sometime at least 30 years after the event when these stories were written down. Now, think about it.

If a friend of yours died, do you think that 30 years later you still wouldn't know how he died? Especially if it was not a mysterious death, if it was something that all the people of Jerusalem knew about. That's what it says in Acts chapter 1. It says, This was known to all the people of Jerusalem. We're not talking about a mysterious death that was uninvestigated, and so there's still many theories about how it happened.

We're talking about a publicly known thing that happened. Do you think that 30 years later when the Gospel of Matthew was written and when the book of Acts was written that there was still some confusion on the part of the disciples as to what happened to Judas? Hardly likely. It is much easier to believe that both accounts are true than to believe that one of them is mistaken.

Because in order for one of them to be mistaken, then either Luke or Matthew would have to be extremely ignorant of what had happened. And that ignorance does not seem likely to have been able to prevail in the setting that all this took place in. I'm sure that Matthew and Peter and the rest of the disciples, as soon as any of them knew what happened to Judas, they all knew because it would have been much discussed among them.

And whatever information Luke got, he would have gotten from them. And therefore he

would have gotten the same information. And therefore it seems to me very much likely that Luke and Peter and Matthew and all the sources of this information had the same story.

They all knew the same story. So why do they seem to tell different stories? Well, they don't necessarily tell different stories. They may tell different parts of the whole story.

For example, Matthew tells us that Judas went and hanged himself. We read nothing more of what happened to Judas' body. We don't read of him being buried.

We don't read of him being found. We don't read of him rotting there hanging from a rope. We're just told he hanged himself, and that's the last we hear of him from Matthew.

In Luke's version in the book of Acts, we read that his body fell headlong and burst open on the ground below. Now, is it impossible for both of these accounts to be true? Of course it isn't impossible. It's not a question of whether it's likely or common or anything like that.

The question is, is it possible? Is it possible that a man may hang himself, and then after that his body may fall to the ground and be broken open on sharp stones below him, especially if it's been bloated, if he's hung there for some time and the body bloats and is swelled up with fluids and so forth, and then either the body is cut down by those who find him or else the rope breaks or the branch breaks or something and the body bursts open. While this would be a very gruesome and unusual event, there's absolutely nothing to suggest that it's impossible for both these things to be true. It's much less likely that one of them is false, as I said, because that would require a high degree of ignorance on the part of one of the writers, which is not likely to be a scenario that is acceptable.

So we have the likelihood that Judas hanged himself, and then afterwards, sometime afterwards, his body was known to have fallen to the ground and burst open. That's not really a serious problem to someone who's open-minded and looking at the evidence open-mindedly. All right? That's no problem.

Now, there is another thing to consider, and that is, who bought the field? Because it says in Matthew that Judas threw the money down in the temple, and the priest bought the field. In Acts 1, verse 18, it just says he bought a field, Judas bought a field. Now, what do we have here? We have here a very common manner of speaking, in which that which is done in the name of another person is attributed to that person.

If somebody dies and leaves in their will a great sum of money for some charity, and so the persons who are the executors of the will write a check and give that check to that charity, would we say that they gave that gift to charity, or that the person who died

gave the gift to charity? Well, both would be true. One is more exact than the other. If a man bequeathed money to charity, and somebody after his death took his money and gave that money to charity, he donated it, but so did they.

Depending on who you talk to, you could get both sides of this. It was done on his behalf. It was done in his name.

It was done with his money, but it was done actually by agents acting on his behalf. It's extremely common to speak in this way, to say that Judas' money was taken, and a field was purchased in his memory, or by the way, on his behalf. It was his money.

The priest did not accept it back. It was not their money. It was Judas' money, and they took it and they spent it a certain way.

In retrospect, you could say Judas purchased that field. He did so posthumously after his death, but he did it nonetheless, and certain persons acted on his behalf, doing it for him. Both statements are entirely true.

Now, there's one other problem here, actually two, but one that we've identified already, and that is why was the field called the field of blood? Well, in Matthew it says it's because it was purchased with blood money, and it was used as a burial place for people who were strangers who died in Jerusalem and had no other place to be buried, and therefore it was called the field of blood. In Acts it says it was called the field of blood because Judas' entrails gushed out on it. It's entirely possible for a person to be called something for more than one reason.

Esau, for example, is a name, he was called Edom. Okay, Edom was a nickname of his. Why was he called Edom? Well, Edom means red.

Well, we call, sometimes people are called red because they have red hair. Actually, Edom had red hair. That is, Esau was born covered with red hair, the Bible says.

And therefore, that's one reason to call him red, because he was red in color and his hair was red. Just like we have people whose nickname is red today because of their red hair. Well, Esau had red hair and that's one reason to call him red.

Another reason we're told in Scripture is because he sold his birthright for some red lentil stew. It says, therefore, he's called Edom. Well, why is he called Edom? Edom means red.

There's more than one reason. Some people call him red for no better reason than his hair is red. Others see an additional reason to call him red, because for the sake of something red, he sold his whole future.

And therefore, he's called Edom, it says. Now, a field may be known as the field of blood. And it may initially be known that way because it was purchased with blood money.

But afterward, if a gruesome act of bloodshed occurred on the field, that may be another reason people called it the field of blood. There may be more than one reason for calling it that. And Matthew records one reason and Acts records the other.

Now, remember, if we are going to argue that the Bible has contradictions in it, we have to be able to demonstrate that the two passages, which we claim contradict each other, are not both true or cannot both be true. The fact of the matter is that the accounts of the end of Judas in Matthew and in Acts are different from each other in content. But they are not contradictory to each other because it is not impossible for both accounts to be true.

More likely, they each give a part of the whole story. And by looking at both accounts, they supplement one another so that we know more about the whole situation. There is one other problem, and that is that a quote is given, about 30 pieces of silver.

And this quote is attributed to Jeremiah the prophet by Matthew in Matthew chapter 27. However, the quotation appears to be a quote not from Jeremiah the prophet, but from Zechariah the prophet, a different prophet. This has led many people to believe that Matthew made an error here and that he quoted Zechariah thinking he was quoting Jeremiah.

Because the passage he quotes bears a close resemblance to a passage in Zechariah, but Matthew says it was Jeremiah the prophet who said these things. Is there a contradiction here? Well, some people think so. And, you know, it looks bad.

It looks bad for Matthew. However, if Matthew did make a mistake, that would require us to modify our understanding, at least some of us, of what we think about the inspiration of the Gospel of Matthew. If he could make a mistake like that, was he inspired? Well, this is a problem, but it's not insurmountable.

However, it's insurmountable in the time we have right now because we'll be done here in about 30 seconds, and we'll have to come back to it next time. So I hope that you'll join us as we look at this passage again. It is a problem, but it is a problem that can be solved.

If you want to know how it can be solved, tune in again next time, and we will look at it again and see why it is that Matthew said that Jeremiah said these words, and then ends up quoting, as it appears, Zechariah, a different prophet altogether. Tune in tomorrow. We'll continue our discussion in this study.