

Jesus' Passion and Death ... and What They Mean for Humanity

Context of Jesus' Passion and Death

1. Jesus travels to Jerusalem one final time and is greeted by the people as a king (Mt 21:1-11). Christianity as a whole celebrates Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.
2. Jesus is betrayed by Judas in that Judas "delivers" Jesus to the Jewish authorities (Matt 26:14-16 and 20-25)
3. Last Supper (Matt 26:26-30)
 - a. At the Last Supper, Jesus is celebrating the Passover with his disciples. Important: The celebration of the Eucharist (mass) is closely linked to the Passover.
 - b. Jesus' passion and death occurs during Passover. This relates the redemption and salvation that Jesus offers to all people with the redemption and salvation of the Israelite people at Passover.
 - c. At the Passover supper, Jesus institutes the Eucharist, the true presence of his body (bread) & blood (wine). This is Jesus' new covenant with humanity.
 - 1) Flesh and blood of Passover lamb => Body and blood of Jesus
 - 2) Passover lamb => Jesus is "Lamb of God"
 - The sacrifice of the Passover lamb spares the first-born of the Hebrew people from death. The Passover was God's means to free the Hebrew people from slavery under the Pharaoh and bring them to a new life as the "People of God."
 - The sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God, on Calvary (crucifixion) spares humanity from eternal damnation. Jesus' passion/death/resurrection is God's means to free humanity from the slavery of sin, and to offer it salvation (new life) through faith in God.
 - 3) The Eucharist is God's means of remaining present to us today.
4. Jesus predicts Peter's denial (Matt 26:31-35), and Peter later denies three times that he knows who Jesus is (v 69-75).
5. Agony in Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36-46)
 - a. Jesus did not want to die, and asks the Father to spare him: "Father ... let this cup pass from me"
 - b. Although Jesus did not want to die, he was willing to accept what he had to do: "Yet not as I will, but as you will." In accepting what was in store for him, Jesus was faithful to the Father's will and offered a model to his followers as to how they should be faithful as well, even to death.
 - c. Jesus is arrested by the Jewish authorities and brought to the Sanhedrin (Matt 26:47-56)

Trial before the Sanhedrin (Matt 26:57-68)

1. The Sanhedrin is the Jewish religious court, Jesus is brought to the Sanhedrin and put trial for violating the Law of Moses.
2. Trial ...
 - a. v. 63b-64: Then the high priest said to him, "I order you to tell us under oath before the living God whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus said to him in reply, "You have said so, but I tell you: "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

- b. v. 65-66: Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has blasphemed! What further need have we of witnesses? You have now heard the blasphemy, what is your opinion?” They said in reply, “He deserves to die.”
- 3. The Sanhedrin convicts Jesus of blasphemy.
 - a. Blasphemy
 - Speaking or acting against God or against sacred things, disrespecting God’s name.
 - Claiming that one is God, or assuming the rights and qualities of God (dictionary.com)
 - b. According to the Law of Moses, blasphemy is a violation of 1st Commandment. It is a capital crime and its punishment is death.

Trial before Pontius Pilate (John 18:28-19:16)

Context

1. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of the province and a gentile, he was not Jewish and had no real interest in Jewish religious laws.
2. The Jewish authorities had no real power to execute, they needed Roman authority. This is why the Sanhedrin brought Jesus to Pontius Pilate after it convicted Jesus of blasphemy.
3. Praetorium ... (v.28)
 - a. Pilate’s headquarters, his office and/or home
 - b. The Jewish authorities would become ritually impure if they were to enter the Praetorium, and this “impurity” would mean that they could not celebrate the Passover. As a result, Pilate had to come out of the praetorium and meet the authorities outside.

Trial

1. It is important to note that Pilate did not want to execute Jesus.
 - a. Blasphemy is not a Roman crime ...
 - “Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your own law” (18:31a)
 - “[Pilate] again went out to the Jews and said ‘I find no guilt in him.’” (18:38b, see also 19:4 and 19:6)
 - b. Pilate tries to release Jesus, but the crowd calls for Barabbas (18:39-40)
2. Jewish authorities change the accusation against Jesus from blasphemy to treason.
 - a. Jewish authorities: “If you release him, you are not a friend of Caesar. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar” (19:12b)
 - b. The term “opposes Caesar” implies that the person is Caesar’s rival. This is treason.
 - c. Treason is a violation of Roman law and it is punishable by execution.
 - d. Important: Pilate sentences Jesus to death on the political charge of treason, not on the religious charge of blasphemy (19: 13-16)

Crucifixion

1. Form of Roman torture & execution
 - a. Crucifixion is a public spectacle, the condemned person is forced to carry his cross (the means or instrument of his death) and the execution takes place in a very public location – often just outside a city gate.

- b. The entire process of execution is meant to maximize the humiliation of the person being executed. The person is paraded through the streets and is taunted by both the soldiers and the crowd. Also, the condemned person is executed naked.
 - c. The entire execution process is meant as an example to others: "If you cause trouble, this is what will happen to you."
2. How crucifixion "works" as a means of death
 - a. Fear
 - b. Shock/loss of blood
 - c. Exposure
 - d. Suffocation, through breaking legs
 3. Jesus was crucified at Golgotha – "Place of the Skull" (Matt 27:33)

Jesus' death

1. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)
2. Two criminals crucified with Jesus ... (Luke 23-39-42, this account is found only in Luke's gospel)
 - a. Criminal #1 mocks Jesus: "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us"
 - b. Criminal 2: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" => This person, even while being executed, professes faith in Jesus
 - c. Jesus: "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" => Jesus "heals" and promises salvation to criminal #2 because of his faith
3. Last words
 - a. "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani" (Matt 27:46)
 - "My God, my God, why have you forsaken (abandoned) me?"
 - Matthew's Gospel has Jesus quoting Psalm 22 from the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures - again a reference back to Judaism that the gospel's original audience would have clearly understood.
 - b. "It is finished" (John 19:30)
 - c. "Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit" (Luke 23:46).
 - Luke's gospel emphasizes the Holy Spirit, which is a central theme throughout both the gospel and Acts of the Apostles (which was also written by Luke).

Immediately after Jesus' death

1. Upon Jesus' death, the veil of sanctuary torn (v. 51). This signifies that ...
 - a. There is no further need for temple (animal) sacrifice in reparation for the people's sins.
 - b. Jesus' sacrifice makes reparation for all of humanity's sins, no other sacrifice needs to be made.
2. Upon Jesus' death, the tombs were opened (v 52). This signifies that ...
 - a. Jesus' death is "life-giving," it opens the way to eternal life.
 - b. Heaven is now "open" for those who had previously died, and for those who are to come.
3. At Jesus' death, the centurion, a Roman officer, proclaims ...
 - a. "Truly, this was the Son of God" (Matt 27:54)
 - b. "This man was innocent beyond doubt" (Luke 23:47)

- c. Once again, it is a gentile (non-believer) who recognizes who Jesus is, not the people of Israel. The gospel authors contrast this gentile's faith with Israelite people's lack of faith.

Burial (Matt 27:57-66)

1. Jesus was buried in haste due to the quickly approaching Sabbath (v 57-61) ...
 - a. Jesus' family and followers did not have time to properly prepare his body for burial as mandated by the Law of Moses
 - b. His family and followers needed to return on the "first day" of week (Sunday) to properly prepare the body for burial
2. Guard at tomb (v 62-66)
 - a. The Jewish authorities feared that Jesus' followers would steal his body
 - b. Pontius Pilate authorized guard

Theological Significance of Jesus' Death

Did Jesus really die? (#595-637, Q.6)

1. Christianity teaches that Christ really died in that he experienced the separation of his body and soul.
2. Jesus experienced the same death that all humans have experienced, or will experience.

What did Christ's death accomplish? (#595-637, Q. 5)

1. As a Paschal ("of Passover/Easter") sacrifice, Jesus' death ...
 - forgives or "takes away" (makes reparation for) the sin of the world
 - redeems ("buys back") humanity from the consequences of its sins
2. As a Sacrifice of the New Covenant, Jesus' death ...
 - reconciles humanity with God
 - restores humanity to communion with God

"Positive" meaning of death (#1005-1014, Q. 2)

1. Through baptism ...
 - humans are incorporated into Christ's redeeming act
 - sacramentally, humans "die with Christ"
2. Physical death ...
 - completes the sacramental "dying with Christ" begun at baptism
 - completes the full incorporation of the person into Christ's redeeming act => "If we have died with him, we will also live [eternally] with him" (*Catechism*, #1010)