

24 THE WAY OF DEATH

Nichole didn't like funerals. Like many young people, death was something far from her mind—until the day her grandmother died. Nichole sat with her grandmother at church on Sunday. But early the next morning, Nichole's parents received the telephone call with the bad news.

Nichole had seen hundreds of deaths on television and in the movies. She had seen death on the nightly news. She had read books in which people died or were murdered. But all those deaths seemed so far away. Television, movies, and books kept death at a distance. In them, death seemed not to be so real, so painfully personal.

Now Nichole's grandmother was dead. All Nichole's cool distance from death suddenly collapsed. Death is final.

One day later Nichole stood at the back of the room in the funeral home. She was unable to move any closer to her grandmother's coffin. Death is final.

3 STATEMENTS

- Jesus was dangerous because he actually believed in the way of God's kingdom.
- The people rejected Jesus, who was the real source of their security.
- Jesus was never too busy or absorbed in his own troubles to reach out with the good news—even in his own death.

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Source

WHO WAS THE GUILTY?

Three groups of people came together to get rid of Jesus. Before the night of Jesus' arrest they had no connection with one another. But now, strangely, they had the same purpose.

These groups of people were Peter (a representative of all the disciples—even you), the chief priests and elders (representatives of established religion), and Herod and Pilate (representatives of government). These groups are mirrors in which we can see our own guilt in sentencing Jesus to death.

You will need to be biblical detectives in order to discover the reasons behind each group's desire to be rid of Jesus. Read each group's story. Write down on a separate sheet of paper the evidence you find. Write why you think they wanted Jesus out of the way. Make a list of the key words that show their reasons.

Peter	Luke 22:54-62
The chief priests and elders	Luke 22:63—23:7
Herod and Pilate	Luke 23:1-25

In the flickering light of a campfire, Peter saw who he truly was. He was one who would condemn Jesus, the other disciples, and the way of God's kingdom in order to save his own skin. Jesus was dangerous because to follow him was a threat to Peter's own security. Life for Peter, the fisherman from Galilee, may not have been great, but it was okay. He got by with the way things

were. Jesus came to change that. And that was too risky.

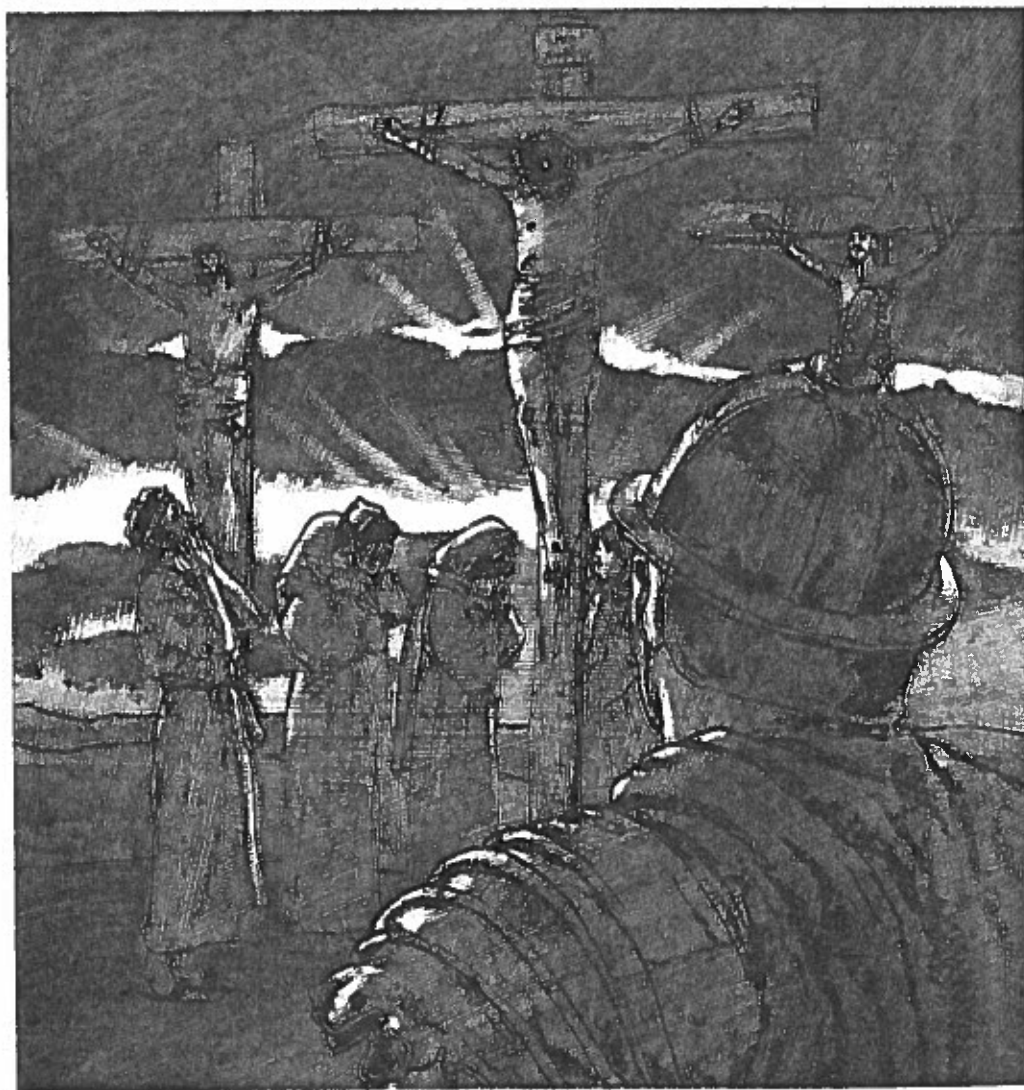
For the chief priests and elders, *Jesus was dangerous because he actually believed in the way of God's kingdom.* Jesus thought that God actually cared for people and wanted to rescue them from themselves. Jesus had come to make the kingdom way real for the people and to do it among them. For the chief priests and elders to believe what Jesus said would mean to lose all the power and authority they had. Jesus had to go. Just as for Peter, the chief priests and elders saw it as a matter of self-defense.

Both Herod and Pilate were unwilling participants in the trial of Jesus. Yet even for them, Jesus got in the way of how they wanted things to run. Pilate heard the charges against

Jesus, but Pilate did not know what to do with Jesus. Pilate sent Jesus to Herod, who was the Jewish king who ruled over Galilee. Herod really did not know what to do with Jesus either. He and his soldiers made fun of Jesus, beat him, and sent him back to Pilate. With Jesus back in his court, Pilate wanted to release Jesus. But in the end, he was forced to hand Jesus over to be killed. For both Herod and Pilate, it was a good political decision. They could then go on as they had before. Jesus was out of the way.

Jesus spoke of the necessity of his own death three times. Read these three prophecies in Luke 9:22; 17:25; and 18:31-34. According to Jesus' words and what you have studied thus far in this course, why do you think Jesus had to die?

Jesus was dangerous because he actually believed in the way of God's kingdom.



CRUCIFIED, BUT INNOCENT

Jesus was condemned to death and led out of the city to be crucified. Two others also were crucified with him that day. They, too, had been judged as being guilty. It would have been clear to anyone who saw that sorry procession that these three men were guilty and deserved to die. But this was not apparent to everyone that day. Just as there were three groups who judged Jesus as being guilty, there were four groups or individuals who knew that Jesus was innocent.

The first group who knew Jesus was innocent was the women who followed behind him. As they walked along, they wept and cried out in the way one cries over the death of a loved one. Read what Jesus told these women in Luke 23:28-31.

Jesus' warning was not a cry for vengeance for the injustice done to him. He did not say, "I am not guilty! God is going to get you all." Rather, Jesus' words were sorrowful words over Jerusalem. In choosing Barabbas, Israel had chosen the road that would lead to ruin and disaster. *The people rejected Jesus, who was the real source of their security.*

A second group who knew that Jesus was innocent was one of the groups that sentenced him in the first place. Both Pilate and Herod knew Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him.

1. Look up the following verses and write what Pilate or Herod said about Jesus.

● Luke 23:4

● Luke 23:14

● Luke 23:15

● Luke 23:22

The third one who knew Jesus was innocent was one of the other criminals on the cross. Read what this con-

demned man said about Jesus in Luke 23:41.

This guilty man knew his own guilt. He also knew that Jesus had not left the way that God had planned. "He has done nothing wrong," the man said. It is as if he knew that if Jesus suffered in this way, how horrible a thing it must be for one who was truly guilty to fall into the hands of the living God! His words are another reminder to think again about rejecting God's chosen one.

The fourth and final one to see Jesus' innocence was the Roman military officer who oversaw the crucifixion. Read the words of the centurion after Jesus' last minutes of life (Luke 23:44-49).

2. What was there in Jesus' death that led this non-Jew to believe that Jesus was innocent?

The centurion saw the Jesus was innocent or *upright* because Jesus had remained true to the way that had been set before him. The centurion in effect said, "Even to the last minute, this man thought only of fulfilling his duty."

3. How do you see Jesus' death on the cross as Jesus fulfilling his duty?



The people rejected Jesus, who was the real source of their security.

THREE WORDS

That Jesus was innocent is emphasized in Luke's gospel. But we also must focus on the three sentences or "words" that Jesus spoke from the cross. Read the following passages and write down Jesus' words in the spaces provided.

Luke 23:34

Luke 23:43

Luke 23:46

Jesus was never too busy or absorbed in his own troubles to reach out with the good news—even in his own death.

Jesus' first word from the cross addressed a situation of suffering and persecution. Luke's church probably was suffering under a great deal of persecution. It was threatened with martyrdom. There were people being killed, and those words of Jesus from the cross spoke to suffering. So first of all, Luke's story of Jesus' death seems to say, "Jesus died with this kind of attitude toward his persecutors, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' " (Luke 23:34).

That was not simply a passive acceptance of suffering as if to say, "Well, there is nothing I can do about it anyhow." It was not some kind of hopeless acceptance of political force. This was because the third word, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," is a confession of faith that speaks to suffering, too.

The reason Jesus could have that sort of attitude toward his persecutors was that Jesus knew that both he and his persecutors were in the hands of God.

Luke's church was a church that experienced persecution. Luke's church also was a missionary church. It was a church that looked back to Peter and Paul and their great preaching missions. It was a church that had seen its history from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). And there in the Roman Empire, the Christian church was aware that it had to, that it must, out of the very central issue of faith, speak the gospel in the midst of suffering.

The second word that Jesus spoke as he reached out—his hands still nailed to the cross—was to the one dying by his side. Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Jesus was never too busy or absorbed in his own troubles to reach out with the good news—even in his own death.

Sometimes we become so absorbed in our own pain, our own trouble, and our own struggles that we forget what the whole struggle is all about. But Jesus did not. The cross was the very place where Jesus could say, "Truly

I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Look back over the three words Jesus spoke from the cross and what they meant to Luke's church.

1. How do you think the followers of Jesus felt when they heard Jesus speak these hope-filled words from the cross?

2. Which word speaks best to you in the situation in life in which you find yourself? Explain your answer.

Shaping life

THE WAY OF JESUS

Luke was talking to his church and to you. He was saying, "Look at that cross. That cross will tell us how Jesus did it, and how the early church did it, and how we also proclaim the good news that comes from the cross of Christ."

Luke wrote his story of Jesus' death in the way he did because he saw that his church was in crisis. He wanted to give to his church the good news of Jesus so that they could meet their real-life situations. He knew that the cross of Christ could give them hope and guidance.

In many places around the world today the church is experiencing persecution. Christians who are trying to live Jesus' way of God's kingdom are being killed. Persecution of Christians is not limited to physical violence in far-away places. Even within your own country and community Christians may feel the sharp pains of trouble because of their faith.

● There is a young woman who has been left out of her group because she reads the Bible during study hall.

- There is a man who has lost his job because he refuses to do things he believes are immoral.
- Men and women have been put in prison because they protest their government's use of violence in other countries.

In addition to suffering persecution for the faith, the Christian church lives within a world of human suffering. People are starving. Others do not have access to clean water. There are homeless families in many cities both large and small. In nearly every news broadcast or newspaper you can find examples of people crying out to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

1. What problems and concerns do you see that are of concern for the church?

2. In what ways do you see the death of Jesus and what he said on the cross addressing these issues?

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

The powers of darkness prevailed against Jesus. With the help of insiders, Jesus was tracked down and captured. There was no escape. The darkness grew deeper. The cross stood ready. Jesus died.

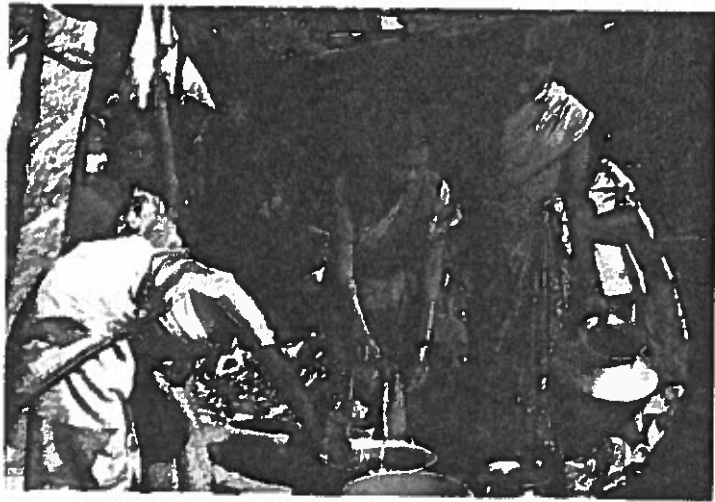
Jesus did what he had promised to do at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus preached good news to the poor, he proclaimed release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. He raised the dead, fed the hungry, healed the sick, and made the lame to walk. Jesus came preaching repentance of sin and God's gracious desire to forgive. The problem was, people did not really want it. With Peter and the disciples, the chief priests and elders, and Pilate and Herod, we killed him. Jesus got in the way of how we wanted to run things—even our relationship with God.

We don't like to face that fact because we are the ones who are caught in the act of being who we really are:

sinner, fakes, liars, deniers, and unbelievers.

To say that we are responsible for Jesus' death means that we come face-to-face with our own denial of Jesus. It means that we are forced to look at our own lives and how we respond to others to see that in most cases we do not live out Jesus' way of the kingdom.

But Jesus does not leave us to die in our sin. Jesus has taken that sin upon himself and died to it. Just as Jesus spoke those three words from the cross when he died, Jesus continues to speak those same words to you.



H. Etness

Read the following confessional prayer.

"Most gracious God, we confess to you and to each other that we have denied Jesus as our Lord. We confess that we have followed our own way instead of the way of your kingdom. We confess that we have turned our backs on one another and upon our sisters and brothers in Christ throughout the world.

We pray that you would forgive us for Jesus' sake. Strengthen us in faith toward you and in compassion to those around us. Amen."

As the word of forgiveness, read together the following words of Jesus from the cross.

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

FURTHER

opportunities

Misna Minutes

Continue your reading of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Select a different passage than you read last week. The passion stories (stories of Jesus' death) are recorded in Matthew 21:1—27:66; Mark 11:1—15:47; Luke 19:28—23:56; or John 18:1—19:42. Read it as you would a short story, paying close attention to the details and the characters. Write down anything new or surprising that you discover about the story of Jesus' death. What are the differences between the two accounts you have read?

Activity 1

Arrange with your pastor or

worship committee for a worship service in which Luke 19:28—23:56 is read by a group of people. The reading of the entire passion story is appropriate for Palm Sunday.

Activity 2

Create a poster that shows how the cross of Christ speaks to the troubled situations in the world today. Share your poster with your class and congregation.

Activity 3

Design a dance or compose a song that expresses your thoughts about the death of Jesus on the cross. Share your creation with your class. You also may wish to ask your pastor or worship committee if you could share it with the congregation during a worship service when appropriate.

FOCUS



ON PONTIUS PILATE

What a spot to be in! Pontius Pilate didn't even belong in Jerusalem. He belonged in Caesarea, by the sea, the center of Roman government for Judea. Pilate had only come to Jerusalem as a courtesy, for it was Passover.

Soon after he arrived, the high priests of Jerusalem demanded that Pilate get involved in one of their own political and religious arguments. He hated the very thought of it. He knew that if he got involved, he would surely make the Jews even angrier with him. But the priests insisted. "A man from Nazareth in Galilee has called himself a king," they said. "That means he is Cae-

sar's enemy. Surely Pilate could not excuse so serious a crime!"

Pilate consented to speak to the prisoner, Jesus of Nazareth. He found no reason to grant the priests' wish. He thought Jesus was innocent. He tried to release Jesus, but the priests clamored for the death sentence.

Pilate gave in.

Pilate knew he had to work with the leading Jews of the nation. It seemed better to him to send Jesus to the cross than disrupt relations. He washed his hands of the matter as though that took away responsibility for having Jesus killed.

A stone block found in the ruins of Caesarea has the name *Pontius Pilate* inscribed on it, but the world could never forget him anyway. He was banished by his own government and died an unhappy man.