

The Passion Narrative of St. Matthew

NARRATOR: The mood of the people in the city of Jerusalem was one of celebration and excitement. It was the week of the Feast of the Passover, a Holy day that reminded all of Israel of the time when God saved them from slavery in Egypt. They continued to hope that God would act again and send to them the Messiah, the one from God who would save them from the oppression of the Romans who now ruled their land. As was his custom, Jesus made his way toward the temple to worship there with his disciples now that the crowds had diminished. On their way, the disciples spoke:

DISCIPLE #1: Lord! Is it wise for us to go to the temple?

DISCIPLE #2: Yes Lord. It is not a very safe place for you. You might be arrested there!

JESUS: Friends, I have told you that all is now in the hands of God. I will not hide away from the mission he has called me to proclaim. I go to the house of Prayer as always, knowing that God shall guide us.

DISCIPLE #3: But master, look! There are Pharisees from the temple following close behind us. They are just waiting for a chance to have you arrested.

NARRATOR: Although the disciples were afraid, Jesus reassured them and comforted them as they walked along. Soon, they could see the great temple of Jerusalem.

DISCIPLE #1: Lord, we are here. Look how beautiful the temple is.

DISCIPLE #2: I have never seen a structure more lovely.

DISCIPLE #3: Nor have I. And just look at all the people who are here!

NARRATOR: But the face of Jesus was not one of wonder and amazement. In fact, he seemed angry as he stepped up his pace. He walked through the edge of the crowd and made his way to the courtyard where moneychangers and people with animals for sale were doing business. He bolted from the midst of his friends and shouted:

JESUS: Out! Out I say! Take these animals and your money and get out!

NARRATOR: Jesus scattered the animals and turned over the tables of those doing business and proclaimed:

JESUS: It is written in the Scriptures that God said: My Temple will be called a house of prayer. But you are making it a place for thieves!

NARRATOR: Jesus' actions created quite a stir. The moneychangers and those with animals didn't know what to do. And many other people who were blind or crippled came to him there and he healed them all. Some of them even shouted:

ALL: Praise! Praise to David's Son!

NARRATOR: Now the Pharisees and Chief Priests heard this and they were very angry.

PRIEST #1: Hrrrmph! Look at what is happening here! These people have gone mad!

PRIEST #2: Yes! We must do something. This Jesus has created a dangerous mood in the people. He must be stopped.

PRIEST #3: By all means. He is a threat that must be dealt with.

NARRATOR: So the religious leaders approached Jesus to reprimand him publicly.

PRIEST #1: Look man! Do you hear what the crowd is shouting? They believe you are the Messiah...the descendant of our great King David!

PRIEST #2: Yes. Stop them at once, before they get out of hand.

PRIEST #3: These ignorant people have the ideas of children. They must be silenced. Don't you hear them?

JESUS: Yes. I do hear them. But haven't you heard what the Scripture says: You have trained children and babies to offer perfect praise.

NARRATOR: Jesus silenced the priests with his response and left them and the city. But the priests were not finished with him yet. They would continue to watch and wait for a way to arrest Jesus and put a stop to his public heresy. But they needed to find the right time. For the people of the city believed and listened to Jesus very closely. And he taught them many things by using teaching stories or parables.

JESUS: People of God, hear me. Once there was a man who owned a vineyard. He rented it to some tenants and left to travel. He tried to send people to collect his portion of the harvest. He sent slaves and servants and they were beaten and treated cruelly. So he decided to send his son. He thought that they would surely listen to him. But when they saw the son they said: Let's kill him! So the land will be ours. Now, what do you think the owner will do to those tenants?

DISCIPLE #1: He will kill those evil men for what they have done!

DISCIPLE #2: Yes! And he will give the land to others who will care for it as he wishes.

DISCIPLE 23: He will give it to those who will freely share what belongs to their master!

JESUS: How ironic it is that Scriptures say: That the stone that is the most important of all will be rejected as worthless by builders. So I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you people who do not bear proper fruits and will be given to those who respond to his will!

NARRATOR: Now the people in the crowd and the priests and Pharisees as well knew that Jesus was talking about the people who were rejecting him. And they were angered by Jesus and began to make threats.

PRIEST #1: Ahhh! Did you hear this blasphemy? Arrest him! Arrest him I say!

PRIEST #2: Yes! We need no more reason than this! He deserves to die for this heresy!

PRIEST #3: Wait my friends! Wait. I agree with you but look! The people protect him. They will surely kill us if we try to take him now. We must look for another way!

NARRATOR: The religious leaders kept their word. They sought time and time again to trap Jesus and to get him to do something that would allow them to gain favor in the eyes of the people. One pharisee, directed by the others, came to Jesus with a question that they hoped would set a trap against him so that they might dishonor him once and for all.

PHARISEE: Great teacher. You have studied the Law that we hold to be true. Tell me now, of all the commandments that we follow, which is the greatest?

JESUS: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest of all the commandments you have learned. And the second most important commandment is very much like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. For the whole Law of Moses and the prophets depends on these two commandments.

NARRATOR: Once again Jesus quieted the questions of the religious leaders. He went on teaching publicly and healing and telling the people about God's will for them. And just two days before the Feast of the Passover he reminded those listening:

JESUS: In two days, as I have told you before, it will be the Passover Festival. And then, the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.

NARRATOR: Jesus' words were more true than most of his disciples could imagine. For at that very moment, the chief priests and elders were together in the palace of Caiaphas, the High Priest. They were making plans on how to arrest Jesus and put him to death!

CAIAPHAS: Brethren, you know why we have assembled. It is time for us to take action against this heretic, Jesus of Nazareth.

ALL: Yes! Let it be so! Kill him! It must be done!

CAIAPHAS: He has blasphemed our living God and has turned the people to sinful ways.

ALL: He must die! Let us take action! We must stop him now! He is a traitor!

CAIAPHAS: I hear your cries for justice. I too want to put an end to this man. But we dare not make a move against him while this festival is taking place. The people will riot against us! So then, we shall make the arrest at a quiet time away from the crowds and after the festival. And then, we shall put him to death!

ALL: Amen! Yes...Yes! Let it be so. It's what he deserves. Death to the heretic Jesus!

NARRATOR: Even as the religious leaders plotted Jesus' death, Jesus had removed himself from Jerusalem to a small town nearby called Bethany. He was in the home of a man named Simon who had been healed of a dreaded skin disease. While Jesus was eating, a woman came to Jesus with some expensive perfume that she carried in an alabaster jar. She broke the jar and began to pour the expensive ointment on Jesus' head. Some of the disciples grumbled out loud at what was being done.

DISCIPLE #1: Look! Just look at that senseless waste. She is pouring that entire jar of perfume out all at once.

DISCIPLE #2: It might've lasted for months but she wasted it all for just one use!

DISCIPLE #3: And just think how much money that perfume might have raised for the poor! Why it might have fed several families for weeks!

NARRATOR: Jesus knew that the disciples were troubled and he spoke to them.

JESUS: Brothers. Why are you thinking that this woman has done some harm? Do not bother her. She has done a beautiful and marvelous thing for me. The poor people you speak of will

be a part of the world as long as it exists. But I will not be with you forever. What this woman did was to pour out this perfume on me in order to prepare me for my burial. And I tell you now, that wherever the gospel is preached all over the world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.

NARRATOR: Now after Jesus had been anointed by the woman, one of the twelve disciples, named Judas Iscariot went to the Chief Priests in order to betray Jesus.
(KNOCK...KNOCK...KNOCK!)

PRIEST #1: There is a knock at the door. Who could it be at this hour?

PRIEST #2: Let us see who dares to be about. Hey! Who is it that knocks upon our door?

JUDAS: It is a friend. Open the door!

PRIEST #1: And how do we, know that you are a friend?

JUDAS: You seek to find a way to have Jesus arrested. I can help you!

PRIEST #2: Quickly...Let him in.

NARRATOR: Judas entered the front room of the place where the priests had gathered. They were very interested in what he had to say.

PRIEST #1: Now, what is it that you say about Jesus of Nazareth?

JUDAS: I can give him to you. I know how you can arrest him away from the crowds.

PRIEST #2: And how do you know all of this?

JUDAS: I am one of his disciples. I know every move that he makes.

PRIEST #1: If you are a follower of his, why would you betray him to us?

PRIEST #2: Yes. Are you not loyal to him?

JUDAS: Look! It is none of your business why I do what I do. What will you give me if I betray Jesus to you?

NARRATOR: The priests counted out thirty silver coins and gave them to Judas. And from that time on, Judas looked for a chance to hand Jesus over to the religious authorities.
(PAUSE...) It was now the first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. The Disciples wondered how they would celebrate this special occasion.

DISCIPLE #1: Master? Where should we go to get the Passover Meal ready?

DISCIPLE #2: Yes Lord. We have no room to call our own.

JESUS: Go to a certain man in the city and tell him this: "The Teacher says, My hour has come; my disciples and I will celebrate the Passover meal at your house."

NARRATOR: The disciples did as they were told and were amazed that the man whose house they were sent to seemed to know what Jesus' words meant. When evening came and all were gathered in the room they sat down to eat. And Jesus spoke...

JESUS: I tell you now, one of you who sits here with me at this

table will betray me.

NARRATOR: The disciples were shocked and upset when they heard this and they-began to question Jesus.

DISCIPLE #1: Lord! This cannot be so. Is it me?

DISCIPLE #2: Jesus, Master, could it be me?

DISCIPLE #3: Teacher. I cannot believe this! Is it me?

JESUS: It is one of you who even now dips his bread in the dish to eat with me. The Son of Man will die as the Scriptures say he will, but how terrible it will be for that man who will betray the Son of Man! It would have been better for that man if he had never been born!

NARRATOR: It was then that Judas Iscariot spoke:

JUDAS: Surely Teacher, you don't mean me?

JESUS: So you say.

NARRATOR: After the controversy had died down, the meal began. And while they were eating Jesus took a piece of bread, gave a prayer of thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples.

JESUS: Take and eat. This is my body.

NARRATOR: Then he took a sup, gave thanks to God and gave it to them:

JESUS: Drink it, all of you. This is my blood, which seals God's covenant, my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never drink this wine again until the day I drink the new wine with you in my Father's Kingdom.

NARRATOR: After Jesus had spoken the group sang a hymn together and left the room to go to the Mount of Olives where they could find some peace and quiet.

NARRATOR: When they had arrived at their destination Jesus spoke to his trusted friends.

JESUS: Tonight, all of you will run away and leave me. For the Scripture says "God will kill the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." But after I am raised to life I will go to Galilee ahead of you.

NARRATOR: Peter spoke up immediately and said to Jesus:

PETER: Lord! I will never leave you! Even if all the rest leave your side, I will not!

JESUS: Peter...Peter...beloved friend...I tell you that before the rooster crows tonight, you will say three times that you do not know me.

PETER: No, Lord! I will never say that! Even if I have to die with you!

NARRATOR: All the other disciples promised, as did Peter, they would not desert Jesus. They journeyed on to the central garden in that area called Gethsemane. It was here that Jesus spoke to them once again:

JESUS: Sit here while I go over there and pray.

NARRATOR: Jesus took with him Peter, James and John. When they were apart from the rest he said to them:

JESUS: --The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me. Stay here and keep watch with me.

NARRATOR: Jesus went on a little farther, threw himself face down on the ground and began to pray:

JESUS: My Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me! Yet, not what I want, but what you want shall be done.

NARRATOR: Then Jesus returned to his three friends and found them asleep. He spoke to Peter:

JESUS: -How is it that you three could not keep watch with me even for one hour? Keep watch and pray that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak!

NARRATOR: Two more times Jesus went back to pray, and each time that he returned he found the disciples asleep. When he returned the third time he spoke to them:

JESUS: Are you still sleeping and resting? Look! The hour has come for the Son of Man to be handed over to the power of sinful men. Get up! Let us go. Look! Here is the man who is betraying me.

NARRATOR: Even as Jesus was speaking a large crowd arrived and Judas Iscariot was leading them. They had swords and clubs and were ready to arrest the one who Judas would kiss on the cheek. Judas moved toward Jesus and kissed his cheek saying:

JUDAS: Peace be with you, Teacher.

JESUS: Be quick about what you have to do, friend!

NARRATOR: When the mob saw that Judas had kissed Jesus, they moved in to arrest him. One of the disciples drew his sword and cut off the ear of one of the slaves of the High Priest.

JESUS: Put your sword back in its place. All who take the

sword will die by the sword. Don't you know that I could call on my Father for help and at once he would send me more than twelve armies of angels? But in that case, how could the Scripture come true that says what must happen?

NARRATOR: Then Jesus turned and spoke with the crowd:

JESUS: Did you have to come with swords and clubs to capture me as though I were an outlaw? Every day I sat down and taught in the Temple, and you did not arrest me. But all this has happened in order to make come true what the prophets wrote in the Scriptures.

NARRATOR: When Jesus had finished speaking the mob began to take him away. The disciples were afraid for their lives and ran away. The mob took Jesus to the house of the High Priest, Caiaphas. Here, all the leaders of the faith were gathered. The priest brought many false witnesses to testify against Jesus. Finally, two men stepped forward to say:

MAN #1: This man said that he was able to tear down God's Holy temple

MAN #2: Not only that, he said that he would build it back in three days!

NARRATOR: The High Priest stood up and challenged Jesus:

CAIAPHAS: What these men say is very serious. Have you no answer to give them for their accusations?

NARRATOR: But Jesus gave no answer. The frustrated Caiaphas continued

CAIAPHAS: In the name of the living God I now put you under oath: tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God!

JESUS: So you say. But I tell all of you: from this time on, You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Almighty and coming on the clouds of heaven!"

NARRATOR: At this the High Priest tore his clothes and screamed:

CAIAPHAS: Blasphemy! Blasphemy! We do not need any more witnesses! You have all heard this blasphemy! What do you think?

ALL: He's guilty! Kill him! He must die for this! Blasphemy! Let him die!

NARRATOR: Then they spat in Jesus' face and beat him cruelly. They slapped him and mocked him and taunted him by saying:

MAN #1: Prophecy for us, Messiah!

MAN #2: Yes, great One! Guess who hit you!

NARRATOR: Now while all this was taking place, Peter was just outside in the courtyard. He had followed from a distance to be close to Jesus. One of the servant girls of the priest spoke to him:

GIRL #1: You, too, were with Jesus of Galilee.

PETER: I do not know what you are talking about!

NARRATOR: Peter moved away from the woman and went out toward the entrance of the courtyard. There another servant girl approached him.

GIRL #2: This man. He was with Jesus of Nazareth.

PETER: No! I swear that I do not know the man!

NARRATOR: After a little while, one of the men standing nearby spoke out:

MAN #1: Of course you are one of them. After all, you speak like a Galilean and that gives you away!

PETER: I swear that I am telling the truth! May God punish me if I am not! I do not know that man!

NARRATOR: Just then a rooster crowed, and Peter remembered what Jesus had told him:

JESUS: Before the rooster crows three times you will say that you do not know me.

NARRATOR: Peter left the courtyard and ran away. He wept bitterly for what he had done. Early in the morning of the next day the priests and the elders made their plans against Jesus to put him to death. They put him in chains, led him off, and handed him over to Pilate, the Roman Governor. Pilate questioned Jesus.

PILATE: These people claim that you say you are the King of the Jews. Are you the King of the Jews?

JESUS: So you say.

NARRATOR: This angered the priests again and they made many accusations against Jesus so that he might be condemned. When Pilate heard all of this he asked Jesus:

PILATE: These are strong accusations. Do you hear what they are saying about you?

NARRATOR: But Jesus did not answer. Pilate was amazed at

his silence. So Pilate turned and spoke to the crowds that had gathered.

PILATE: You all know that your gracious Emperor, Caesar the Great, allows you to have one prisoner to be set free for your foolish festival. Which one do you want me to set free for you? Barabbas? Or Jesus the Messiah?

NARRATOR: Pilate knew that the Jewish leaders were jealous of Jesus and that is why they had handed Jesus over to him. While he awaited their response a message came to him from his wife and it said:

WIFE: Have nothing to do with that innocent man, because in a dream last night I suffered much on account of him.

NARRATOR: So Pilate went to the crowds again and spoke:

PILATE: Tell me! Whom would you have me set free? Barabbas ? Or Jesus?

ALL: Barabbas!...Let us have Barabbas! Set Barabbas free! Give us Barabbas!

PILATE: What then would you have me do with Jesus, the one they call the Messiah?

ALL: Crucify him! Kill him! Crucify...Crucify! Let him die! He must die!

PILATE: But he has done nothing wrong. What crime has he committed.

ALL: Crucify him! Kill him! You must kill him! He deserves to die! Put him to death!

NARRATOR: Pilate saw that the people were about to riot. So,

he took some water and washed his hands in front of the crowd and said:

PILATE: Look! You are my witnesses. This is your doing. I am not responsible for this man's death...You are!

ALL: Good! Let it be so! Yes...we are responsible! Kill him! He must die!

NARRATOR: Then Pilate set Barabbas free as the crowd has asked. He handed Jesus over to them to be crucified. Pilate's soldiers stripped off his clothes and put a scarlet robe upon him. They made a crown out of thorns and placed it on his head. They also gave him a stick to hold. Then they knelt before Jesus and began to mock him.

SOLDIER #1: Long live the King of the Jews!

SOLDIER #2: Hail the great King of the Jewish nation!

NARRATOR: They spat on Jesus and hit him many times. They stripped off the royal robe and put his own clothes back on him. Then they led him out to be crucified on the hill called Golgotha, which in Hebrew means, the place of the skull. There they crucified Jesus and divided his clothes amongst themselves by throwing dice. Above Jesus' head they placed a sign that said: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews!" Then they crucified two other criminals there as well. One on his left. One on his right. People who passed by hurled their insults at Jesus.

MAN #1: Ha! And you were going to tear down the temple in three days!

WOMAN: Not only that, you said you could build it back up all by yourself!

MAN #2: He saved others but now he cannot save himself!

MAN #3: Yes! And this is the great King of Israel?

MAN #1: Great King! If you come down from that cross we will believe in you!

WOMAN: Yes! You say you are God's Son. Well, then have God save you now!

NARRATOR: Even the two bandits being killed that same day hurled insults at Jesus. At noon the whole country was covered with darkness, which lasted for three hours. At three o'clock Jesus cried out:

JESUS: Eli, Eli, Lema Sabachtani? My God, my God, why did you abandon me?

MAN #2: Hey! He's calling for Elijah!

MAN #3: Yes, give him a drink so he can call louder!

MAN #1: No, wait! Let us see if Elijah comes to save him!

WOMAN: Yes! Let the great King call his prophets to bring him a drink!

NARRATOR: Jesus gave out a loud cry and breathed his last. Then the curtain in the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. This curtain had long been a symbol that meant that no person would be allowed too near to God. Then the earth began to shake, the rocks split apart, the graves broke open and many of God's people who had died were raised to life. They left their graves and went into the city where many people saw them after Jesus rose from death. When the soldiers saw all that was happening their leader said

MAN #2: Truly this man was the Son of God!

NARRATOR: There were many women who stayed nearby the cross. They were disciples who had followed Jesus from Galilee. Among them were: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the wife of Zebedee. When evening came, a rich man, named Joseph of Arimathea, came to bury Jesus. He, too, was a disciple of Jesus. He had Pilate's permission to take Jesus away to be buried. So Joseph took the body, and wrapped it in a linen sheet and placed it on his own tomb which had been dug out of solid rock. Then he had a large stone rolled across the entrance to secure it. The women remained, facing the tomb, with great sorrow in their hearts. (PAUSE...) Now when the Sabbath dawned, the Chief priests came again to Pilate.

PRIEST #1: Sir! We need your help.

PRIEST #2: Yes! While this liar was alive he said he would rise again on the third day.

PRIEST #3: We believe his followers will try to steal his body and claim that he fulfilled that foolish promise.

PRIEST #1: Give an order to watch the tomb until after the third day.

PRIEST #2: Place your guards there so that they will not be able to get in.

PRIEST #3: Yes! We must not allow them to create this lie. This lie would be worse than the one this Jesus made himself!

PILATE: Very well! Take a guard and leave. Make the place as secure as you can. Now. Away with you all! I want nothing more to do with you!

NARRATOR: So they left and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and leaving soldiers to stand watch over the grave. Here ends the reading of the passion according to the gospel of St. Matthew.