

“Death for Life”  
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Luke 22:14 – 23:56

Jesus died for them all, except maybe one, and we’ll get to him later. Jesus did it fully aware of how horrible it would be. Crucifixions were common. He’d almost certainly seen at least one, the naked victim gasping for breath, the marks of torture fresh, still bleeding. Like anyone, he felt fear, wept in the garden, begged God for some other way, but instead of running or resisting or hiding, Jesus accepted what needed to happen, allowed cruel men to take and break him, and when the time came, he freely released his spirit so that all might live.

Jesus died for Pilate. That may come as a surprise, but Pilate deserves a little bit of credit. He tried three times to let Jesus go, told people “you’ve got no case, he’s not guilty.” But the crowds kept up the pressure, even after Pilate offered to flog Jesus as a sort of consolation prize. So to quiet the mob and keep the peace, he relented. It was a tense time in Jerusalem. With Passover near, religious fervor was running high. It was just easier and safer to say, “Fine, do as you like with him.”

Jesus died for that screaming crowd, too. There’s an offensive thought. We don’t want that, but despite their hatred for him, their joy at the prospect of making him suffer, Jesus gave himself for them. God knows they needed it, and Jesus knew how irrational an emotional crowd can be, how confusion and fear and bigotry can carry people away like a whirlwind, how unmet expectations create disappointment and kindle fury.

Jesus died for the religious elite as well, those proud men who would stop at nothing. This one really bothers us. Arrogant in their claims to certainty, so envious of Jesus’ popularity, terrified by the danger he posed to their power, they orchestrated the whole thing beautifully.

They bribed Judas, took their target down under the cover of darkness in a place with few witnesses. Their trumped up charges and kangaroo court were a model of efficiency. If it wasn't so utterly evil, you could almost admire how well they managed it all.

Jesus died for the guards who slapped and whipped him, for the people who mocked him as he hung on the cross, for the soldiers that hammered the nails home and hoisted him up. He died for Barabbas, that violent and mean and short-sighted man who did not understand that true revolutions, the type that bring real and lasting transformation, don't come from taking life but from God's grace and forgiveness, which gives life.

Jesus died for his disciples, except perhaps for Judas, whom Jesus cursed. "Woe to that one by whom [The Son of Man] is betrayed!" As to the other eleven, it seems obvious enough that if Jesus would die for all the others, he would die for them, but they deserved it least of all. Of course, nobody deserved it. Nobody ever deserves an act of pure grace, but the disciples had been with Jesus for so long, heard and seen so much, even had warning of what was to come, so that they could brace for it, think about how to respond. But look at what they did that night.

As soon as Jesus told them that he'd been betrayed, an argument broke out over who would take his place. The man wasn't even dead yet. In fact, he was sitting right there, but that didn't stop their bickering over who the next boss would be, who was the greatest among them. Then Jesus warned Simon Peter that major temptation was coming his way, which Peter brushed off with bravado, boasting of a courage that sadly he did not possess. Jesus prophesied that Peter would deny knowing him three times to save his own skin, which happened just as predicted, and what's worse, Jesus watched him do it. "The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered."

And then there was the garden where Jesus prayed. He took his disciples to a secluded place, where they promptly fell asleep. Here was Jesus agonizing over what was to come, and he did it alone. Yes, an angel came as Jesus spoke to his Father, but sometimes in your toughest moments you need flesh-and-blood friends to be there, supporting you, praying with you, alert and ready to help, not taking a nap. But they couldn't even give Jesus that much. They couldn't stay awake, and the way he woke them up shows how much it hurt.

Jesus died for them all: craven, cynical Pilate; the raging, mindless crowd, the strutting holy-rollers who had all the answers and didn't like being challenged; the men who inflicted such pain, maybe because they were sadists or just bored and wanted some entertainment, a way to pass the time. Of course, whatever the case, had they ever been brought to trial, they'd surely have said, "I was just following orders."

Jesus died for his disciples, despite their deficiencies, perhaps *because* of their failings, so that their weakness might be redeemed by his own weakness on the cross. Jesus also died for those who didn't follow him, those who had the chance and let it pass by, for those who never met him, those who were already dead, and those who were yet to be born. Who knows? Maybe Jesus died for Judas, too, despite the curse of woe he brought down upon his betrayer. I hope so. I really hope so, not for Judas' sake, but for my own, because I've sold out my Savior so many times I've lost count, and I'm probably not the only one in this room who's done that.

Jesus died so that all might live, and that's good news, great news, the best news ever. It's worth celebrating, a gift that deserves endless praise and gratitude, because just as Jesus lives in us, so does a little piece of each person who played a role in the process that put him on the cross.

Like Pilate, there's a part of us that will only go so far when it comes to Jesus, and then it just gets too risky or inconvenient. We're busy. We need to move on to other things, and when peer-pressure reaches a certain point, it's just easier to give people what they want, even when that means handing over Jesus, embracing what's popular and dropping what matters the most.

Each of us has spent some time as part of an angry crowd, whipped up by some charismatic demagogue, resentful and howling for vengeance. Sometimes, we aren't even sure why. We just enjoy yelling, and for us it's much easier than way back when, because you don't need to show up in an actual place with actual people. Just tweet. You can do it in your pajamas, or forward a vicious email of questionable truth.

It's a little harder to identify with the religious elite, but let's be honest. Episcopalians are just better. We don't dance around and clap our hands. We don't shout out "Praise Jesus!" or "Amen!" unless those words are printed in the bulletin. We're reverent, disciplined, dignified, anchored in an ancient tradition, and all of that is good. But how defensive we can get. It drives us crazy when people ask, "Have you been saved?" or criticize or condemn our sometimes controversial decisions or the way we worship or whatever it is that's precious to us. Now none of that means that we're plotting to kill Jesus, but it's healthy to wonder sometimes if we've arrested him to keep him quiet.

As for the guards and soldiers, again it's hard to draw a straight line. None of us has ever flogged anyone. (If you have, we really need to talk. Soon.) But sometimes, we fantasize about gruesome misfortune befalling our enemies, and it's intriguing that the most popular and lucrative professional sports are also the most violent. Most of us, including me, like watching athletes beat the hell out of each other. Let's not try to deny that. We need to think about what it means to find enjoyment in violent games.

And then there are those disciples, good people for the most part, loyal but prone to self-promotion when a power vacuum opens. We get sleepy sometimes, often at the worst possible moment, when we need to be alert to the world around us and what's happening in the life of our parish, and what happens in our own hearts. We mean well and want to be faithful and like to think that if push came to shove, we'd go all ninja Secret Service and take a bullet for Jesus. But usually a little teasing or an awkward silence in a conversation will prompt retreat or an equivocation that amounts to denial.

That's a dreadful catalogue of sin. You're welcome. It's not something we like to think about, but it's real. And the reality of our depravity, and our knowledge of it, is what makes the cross where Jesus died such an awesome, astonishing, humbling event. If we were generally OK people, and if OK was good enough, then the cross would be ridiculous. Lovely gesture, admire the sacrifice, Jesus, but the solution, the cure, would be all out of proportion with the problem, with the disease. And perhaps that's why the cross seems to have lost some of its power, some of its ability to both intimidate and console, because we don't appreciate how badly we need it, and what life would be like without it.

Jesus died for them all, including each of us, every part of who we are – good, bad, ugly, and indifferent; the Pilate and Barabbas, the guards and soldiers, the religious elite. He hurt in ways we can hardly imagine, experienced a terror we rarely if ever feel. Jesus suffered and died so that we might be healed and live. Had he not done so, we would have no hope, but he did, and so we do, and that is what makes life worth living. Nothing else. Just that. Amen.