

Good Friday: The innocent blood that divides the world

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[0 : 00] I do keep the sheet open before you there so you can see the scripture passage. So I want to say some words about the innocent blood that divides the world.

The real Jesus Christ was one of the most divisive figures in world history. In fact, he still is right to this very day. And that's because what Jesus says of himself and his life and his death and indeed his own personal significance because it's as offensive and repellent to some as it is beautiful and precious to others.

Just before Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time, he said this, The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many.

Matthew chapter 20, verse 28. That is, the death that Jesus knew he had to die was going to be a death that would bring release from the bondage of sin, from the bondage of those that he came to save.

Release by the payment of a price and that price was his own life blood. Jesus always spoke of his whole mission as one of rescue and redemption.

[1 : 24] Redemption for a dying and a cursed world. And redemption release into what he called a new world. The world of his glorious kingdom. But the only way to get near God, the only way to enter that kingdom is through rescue.

From a real bondage in the power of sin that every single human being by nature is subject to. Every human being is equally helpless to escape from.

That is a very offensive message. It's an affront, isn't it, to our decency, to our dignity. To be branded helpless and in bondage. Indeed, to be branded wicked.

To be branded repugnant to God and an enemy of God. But you see, that's what Jesus says his death is all about. And that's what he says his shed blood is all about.

Nothing else. And therefore, you see, the blood of Jesus Christ accuses us. It accuses us of sin. It accuses us of guilt before God.

[2 : 34] Therefore, it shames us. It humbles us. And that's why we don't like it. We hate being shamed and humbled. Of course we do. And that is why the blood of Jesus Christ divides the world.

You see, in the account that we've got right here in front of us in Matthew's Gospel, that's exactly what he's pointing out to us. The blood of Jesus, the innocent blood of Jesus, divides the world.

Either, either it's the blood that opens the gate of heaven and leads to an eternal redemption, or it's blood that if it's scorned and rejected, ultimately closes that door forever and leads to an eternal rejection.

If you look at the reading as we printed it there, I think you'll see how clearly Matthew has structured the account that he's written here, just to make his message absolutely plain, absolutely clear.

I'm sure you can see that in some of the words we've highlighted, in the symmetry that's used. First of all, just look at the very beginning and the end. These verses focus, don't they, on the fact of Jesus' coming death.

[3 : 39] Look at verses 1 and 2. It shows people scheming to kill him, and he's delivered to Pilate. And at the end, verse 26, there he is, delivered to be crucified.

That's the picture frame, isn't it? Jesus delivered up to death. That's the focus. Now notice, secondly, that the main story could go straight on, couldn't it?

From verse 2 to verse 11. You see, verse 2, Jesus is delivered to Pilate the governor. And in verse 11, there's Jesus before Pilate the governor. We don't need verses 3 to 10, do we, to tell us a story?

But of course, Matthew has included these verses here uniquely. None of the other Gospel writers record it. He's recorded for us the tragic end and the tragic destiny of Judas Iscariot. Why is that? Well, we'll come back to that. But if you look at verse 25, you'll see that there's another symmetry there, isn't there?

[4 : 43] Because he's recorded for us also the tragic destiny of all the people who, just like Judas, call down a curse upon themselves. You see the key focus there in verses 3 to 10 and in verse 25.

Again, it's Jesus' blood, isn't it? Very striking. Verse 4, Judas says, I've betrayed innocent blood. Verse 25, Pilate says he's innocent of this man's blood.

He blames the people. And again, in both instances, there's the same challenge about Jesus' blood, isn't there? Look at verse 4. See to it yourselves, say the priests. Jesus' blood is your problem, to Judas.

Verse 24, same word. See to it yourselves, says Pilate. Jesus' blood is your problem, he says to the people. See, either side of the very center of this story is a stark rejection of Jesus' blood.

Very striking, isn't it? We'll come back to that. But I want you to see the very heart of this story that Matthew is pointing us to. Because the symmetry that he uses points us right to the very center.

[5 : 55] In fact, there's another frame there as well. Look at verses 11 to 14. Again, they're focusing on Pilate, aren't they? And the questions that he has for Jesus. Just like verse 24. Pilate's decision about Jesus.

Pilate's decision about Jesus. And so it's very clear, isn't it? The very heart of this story is that paragraph there on the right, verse 15 down to verse 23. And can you see what it focuses on? Well, of course you can. It's all about two individuals, isn't it? One, we're told, is a notorious prisoner. A guilty man.

His name's Barabbas. The other, we're told, is a righteous man. An innocent man. His name's Jesus. Now you can see, can't you, it's absolutely plain that Matthew has written this whole account of Jesus' trial.

Totally deliberately. Just so that we can see starkly the significance of it. Because in God's sovereign providence, even the very trial of Jesus becomes an active parable of the meaning of the cross of Jesus.

[7 : 05] It's a vivid display of the achievement of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Can you see? It's a picture, isn't it? Of redemption by the innocent blood of Jesus.

Because Barabbas, look at him, is quite literally a guilty one. And quite literally, he exchanges places with Jesus, the innocent one.

And Barabbas is released. And what is the price of the release? Well, it's the innocent blood of Jesus Christ. And that's redemption.

The Son of Man, given his blood, his life as a ransom price. And the guilty man goes free. Just look again at how starkly Matthew paints that exchange.

Look at verse 15. Pilate thinks, you see, that this is going to offer him a way out of his dilemma. Because he doesn't know what to make of this man, Jesus. He doesn't know what to make of this man who remains silent in the face of his accusers.

[8 : 13] And it's totally amazing to him, says verse 14. He was greatly amazed. He doesn't know what to make of Jesus. He does know what to make of the chief priests and the elders. Verse 18 is plain, isn't it?

He knows that they were envious of Jesus. They hated him. So Pilate thinks, well, maybe a popular gesture to the crowd here will get me off the hook.

I can release Jesus. And I can ingratiate myself with the crowds. And at the same time, I can have one in the eye for these rotten priests. By the way, we know from secular writings, from other historians, that Pilate really hated the Jewish leaders.

He didn't like them at all. So that's what I'll do, says Pilate. I know I'll offer them Barabbas, a notorious prisoner. Mark's Gospel tells us even more. He was a murderer.

He was a terrorist. I'll offer them Barabbas, or Jesus. They knew contest, of course. Pilate knew he was totally innocent.

[9 : 14] He says in verse 23, what evil has he done? His wife, too, had had some kind of premonition in her dream and had sent a word to him. Have nothing to do, verse 19, with that righteous man.

Everybody knew that Jesus was innocent and righteous and good. Even Judas said it back in verse 4, didn't he? Innocent blood that I've betrayed.

And yet, verse 20 tells us, the Jewish leaders persuaded them all, all, to shout for Barabbas and to destroy Jesus.

So here we have it. A prisoner is to be released, says verse 15. Notice that word, release. And two men are side by side. One is a murderer. He's a rebel.

He's guilty of heinous sin. And on the other hand, we have a righteous man. An innocent man. Clear in everybody's eyes.

[10:17] So he says, verse 17. Which one do you want to be released? Well, surely, it's obvious, isn't it? Surely the guilty man must face death. Surely the innocent man must walk free.

But that's not what happened. Verse 26. He released for them Barabbas. And having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

Couldn't be more stark, could it? A guilty, vile, and helpless rebel, on the one hand, is released. And the price, the ransom price, the redemption price, is the blood of Jesus.

The innocent for the guilty. You could hardly find a more wonderful, a more vivid picture of the sovereign grace and mercy of God in redemption.

While we were still sinners, says the Apostle Paul, Christ died for us. While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, by the innocent blood of Jesus Christ.

[11:32] There's no suggestion anywhere that Barabbas suddenly changed his ways or that he deserved anything other than death. Not at all. But quite literally, the blood of Jesus bought his release, his redemption.

And he was set free from his bondage. He was set free from the sentence of death that was hanging over him by another's innocent blood. You can imagine him, can't you, later on, at the back of the crowd, looking on at Golgotha, looking bemused as he saw those three crosses.

And he sees the one in the middle and Jesus Christ is hanging there. You can just imagine, can't you, him saying to himself, that was my cross. That's where I was supposed to be.

How can I understand it? But friends, that literal exchange that took place that day is also a picture. It's a wonderful demonstration of the great eternal exchange of God's redemption.

The redemption that Jesus Christ achieved that very day for all who will drink the cup of forgiveness offered in his blood. Not just a temporary release from bondage.

[12:47] Not just a release from earthly punishment and death that was the case for Barabbas that day. But an eternal release from a far, far greater prison of spiritual death.

And a release into the world, the new world of the kingdom of God the Father. Think of Peter's words later on when he writes to the church and says, Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

And that great exchange is what we see everywhere, even in the account of Jesus' trial. In fact, that's why there was a trial. Jesus' enemies didn't need a trial.

They could have arranged his assassination. They didn't want publicity. They feared the crowds. But God determined that there must be a trial. And there must be a public trial.

And he did that precisely because Jesus was bearing sins for his people. And that's also what explains Jesus' silence before Caiaphas and Pilate.

[13:56] Earlier on, Jesus had been brought before Caiaphas, the high priest, and accused of blasphemy. He claims to be God. That was the accusation. But in verse 12 here, before Pilate, it's different.

They charge him with treason, with rebellion against Caesar's rule. They needed that, didn't they, to get the death penalty. But again, verse 14, Jesus was silent.

He gave no answer, not even to a single charge. Why? Well, he was silent because he was the servant of the Lord, as the prophets had spoken.

He was the one come to really and truly bear away the guilt and the sin of his people, to take their sin upon himself for others' sake. Isaiah 53 proclaimed it.

He opened not his mouth like a sheep before the shearers. Why? Because he had no defense to make. He really was bearing the iniquity, the sin of the world against God.

[15:02] And Jesus chose silence before his accusers because he chose to bear guilt in order to redeem his people. He assumed upon himself the real guilt of humankind.

That's why it had to be these two charges that were brought against Jesus, too, blasphemy and treason. Because that sums up, doesn't it, man's sin against God. It goes right back to the very Garden of Eden.

Blasphemy. You will be as gods. That was the serpent's temptation, wasn't it? And they grasped at being God. They committed treason, rebellion against God's perfect rule.

But Jesus, this righteous man, he chose to shed his innocent blood, as Peter says, that he might bear away our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

Because by his wounds, you are healed. And friends, that's the Christian gospel. It's redemption by the blood of Jesus.

[16:10] You have been ransomed, says Peter, not with perishable things like silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ. That was the good news that was proclaimed to you, he says.

That's the gospel. So the hymn writer is right. The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Because the innocent blood, the precious blood of Jesus has been shed and redemption has been achieved. The blood of Jesus, says the Apostle John, cleanses us from all sin.

And that means, really does, all sin. No one here, there's lunchtime. No one you know, no Barabbas. Nobody is beyond the release and the redemption brought by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives. And that's the good news that's at the very heart of Matthew's message here.

[17:15] For all who will rejoice in the blood of Jesus, who will make it their own, who will receive the reconciliation and the redemption and the release that is through his blood and only through his blood.

For all such, God has done it in Jesus Christ. He's opened the life gate that all may go in freely and with joy.

It is a gospel of wonderful grace. It's grace full and free that's offered to all the world. But of course, it is also a message that is a command to all the world to receive that offer of mercy, not to reject it. Not to scorn or mock or hate the precious blood of Jesus. You see, because Matthew is a true gospel preacher, he forces us to face up to the other side of God's free and gracious offer of redemption through the blood of Jesus.

He forces us to see that it is man's responsibility to believe and obey the gospel of God. You see, the blood of Jesus, the precious blood, the innocent blood, confronts every single human being, every one of us and it demands a response from us.

[18:34] It forces itself upon our conscience. It demands that it be cherished, that it be revered, revere, that it be received by us, that it's seen as the precious and the only way of salvation, the only way that life might come to us with our God in heaven above.

And yet, you see, the staggering truth is this. So often, the world will reject the blood of Jesus Christ, won't accept its message, won't have its forgiving power.

the world rejects the blood of redemption and forgiveness and in doing so, calls down a curse upon their own heads. A curse that demands that God reject them forever.

And that's the awful reality that Matthew has refused to leave out in these verses that we've read.

The heart of the message for sure is the reality of the redemption that is by the blood of Jesus. But in those verses that we looked at to begin with, surrounding that central message, is something else that Matthew won't let us ignore.

There is such a thing as rejection of the precious blood of Jesus. Even in the face of the manifest grace and mercy of God in Christ. And Matthew is warning us, he's saying, don't despise, don't devalue the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[20:00] Don't do it. Because that is the only unpardonable sin. You can despise, you can reject the blood of the Lord Jesus in many different ways.

Matthew gives us three examples in these verses. First, there's Judas. Look at verse 5. One way of rejecting the blood of Jesus is through self-despair. I've sinned by betraying innocent blood, he says.

You see, Judas comes to see, doesn't he, the deceitfulness of sin. We all know the truth of that. We know what it's like, don't we, to cherish something illicit, a thrill. As soon as we have it, though, so quickly it becomes empty, doesn't it?

So quickly it disgusts us. That's what happened to Judas. And he turned, didn't he, to religion, to the religion of the world, but he found it empty. He found that there's no forgiveness in the empty religion of man.

So on your conscience, he said to him, see to it yourself. We're not interested. And that's all that the religion of this world can offer you. And Judas is in self-despair and it leads him to curse himself to hell.

[21 : 17] He knows what he's doing. He knows that the law cursed anyone who shed innocent blood by the payment of a bribe. And yet his reaction to that is to call down even more curses upon himself.

He also knew the law said, cursed is anyone who's hanged on a tree. But Judas would rather curse himself to hell than to turn to the one place that he could find real forgiveness in the blood of Jesus Christ.

Peter tells us later, Judas went to his own place. but not because of his sin against Jesus and betraying him.

All the disciples betrayed Jesus. Peter! Think of him! But we read that Peter when he was struck by his sin, Peter went out and wept bitterly.

He was broken and penitent. But Judas, we're told here, he went out and hanged himself. He tried to deal with his sin himself and when he couldn't, he despaired and he resigned himself to hell.

[22 : 33] I've known people like that, maybe you have too. They come to see the truth about themselves and about Jesus Christ and yet, faced with the responsibility to repent before Jesus Christ, they refused.

They'd rather face hell head on than the humiliation of forgiveness only by the gift of the death of Jesus Christ. And beyond forgiveness, said Judas, but ultimately that kind of self-despair, you see, is just sheer perversity.

It rejects the precious blood of Jesus shed for the forgiveness of sins. Verse 25 shows us another way to reject the blood of Jesus in the people's self-defiance.

when faced with the same innocent blood. His blood be upon us and our children, they say defiantly. We don't need forgiveness. That's what they're saying. We're very religious.

We've got God on our side. And so we can destroy the real Jesus Christ and it'll still be fine with God. We can scorn His blood and His atonement. We can reject His unique authority.

[23 : 41] We can ignore the demands of this Jesus Christ and there'll be no consequences from God. None at all. In fact, God will be quite pleased with us. We'll adapt religion quite nicely to our own way of doing things.

And God will be fine. He'll not curse that. He'll bless it. There's plenty of that attitude around too, isn't there? Even in the professing church.

Because of course the human heart will put up with any amount of religion and religious practice and observance as long as it doesn't have to deal with the real truth. The truth about sin.

sin. The truth about our sinfulness that really does provoke the wrath and the condemnation of a holy God. The kind of sin that really does leave us absolutely helpless as enemies of God, as condemned in His sight.

We'll never put up with a gospel like that. Not a gospel where our only hope is in something that God alone can do for us through the immensity and the awfulness of a sacrificed Savior.

[24 : 47] Someone who bears away real sin, who bears real punishment and real wrath of a holy God. Get rid of that kind of gospel. Get rid of that kind of Jesus. Destroy that kind of message.

His blood be upon us and our children. We don't want that Jesus. Jesus. But you see, God will not have the precious blood of His beloved Son scorned and rejected like that.

rejection of the very heart of the gospel will always lead, always, to rejection by God. And that generation that so blithely called down the curse, they bore the curse just a few years later.

Their nation, their city, their temple, everything was absolutely destroyed forever. Just as generations of the professing church in our western world has borne the consequences of rejecting the gospel of the cross and the blood of Jesus shed for sins.

We won't have this Jesus. We won't have any talk about blood and sacrifice and ransom price and wrath. The legacy is there to be seen, isn't it, in the churches of our nation and others?

[25 : 58] Empty, crumbling, turned into shops and restaurants and everything else. So you can reject the blood of Jesus through self-despair. You know you're guilty but you think you're beyond

help.

That's Judas. You can reject the blood of Jesus through self-defiance and self-righteousness. You're confident that your own sin isn't that serious, that God will praise you because of your religion and your good works.

That was the religious mainstream then, it's the religious mainstream today. There's a third example that Matthew gives us, isn't there, of rejection.

It's there in verse 24. In Pilate's self-delusion. Do you see? See, here's a man who doesn't even consider sin and righteousness as an issue at all.

Just simply doesn't concern him. I'm innocent of this man's blood. Very tempting, isn't it, to think that you can just brush off the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 55] Brush off the significance of the cross of Jesus Christ. Maybe you've even read the Gospels and you think, well yes, I can see he was clearly an innocent man. This was an injustice.

Maybe you say, yes, I think the people were wrong. They were wicked. Maybe you've even read the words and the works of Jesus and you've said, yes, frankly I am amazed, amazed at everything he did, everything he said.

But I just don't see what it's got to do with me. I'm innocent of this man's blood. I wasn't there.

What's it got to do with me and my life? Why should it change anything about the way I am? Well, you're wrong if you think that.

Because the Bible tells us you were there. You were involved because your sin was there and involved in Jesus' death. And Jesus was silent because the world's sin was upon his shoulder. So you see, if you wash your hands of Jesus' blood because like Pilate, in the end you'd rather have the praise of men, the popularity with the world is more important to you.

[28 : 09] You won't stand the scorn that the world heaps upon those who would rather stand with Jesus Christ. Then you also, whether you know it or not, are rejecting the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

Or to use the Bible's word, you're trampling underfoot the Son of God. Pilate's question there in verse 22 is the question that faces every single human being, you and me and everyone else.

What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ? You can't avoid that question. But it is the question that divides the world because his blood is the blood that divides the world.

His blood really did achieve redemption forever. For every criminal rebel in this world who will receive the forgiveness and the release that is through his blood alone.

So Matthew says, see it. Don't reject it. Don't reject the precious blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses from all sin forever and ever and ever.

[29 : 24] let that redemption be yours. Let it be yours today. And he will set you free today forever.

Just as Barabbas walked free that day at Calvary. the blood of Jesus Christ divides the world.

Amen. We are going to sing as we close a hymn that bids us to take that seriously. Today your mercy calls us to wash away our sin however great our trespass. Whatever we have been however long from mercy we may have turned away your blood oh Christ can cleanse us and set us free today.

Today. you are going to sing as we Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[32 : 16] Amen. Amen.

Well, every word of that hymn is true. But it may be that it's something very new to you. And if it is, we want to help you to understand more of it. If you look on the back of the sheets here, you'll see at the bottom there's a couple of courses that we're going to be running after Easter called Christianity Explored.

One will be on Thursday lunchtime, just over half an hour here. The other will be on Saturday mornings in one of the cafes down in the Merchant City. And we'd love you to come along to that.

It's an informal time as we look through the Gospels a little bit more and hear the words of Jesus about the works of Jesus. So if you'd like to come to that, do contact us. The numbers are there, but speak to me afterwards if you'd like or one of our staff who'll be glad to tell you more about it.

But our prayer this Easter is that you, along with us, would see and rejoice in and be glad of the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[34 : 00] He will set you free today and cleanse you by His blood if you will trust in Him.

Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ by which we have been brought near to you and through whom we have access to you, our Father, and to our eternal home.

May that message thrill us and possess us this Easter, we pray. And to that end, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of His Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[35 : 10] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.