

JESUS' ENEMIES

by Richard Wurmbrand

(edited by Ellen Oblander)

Table of Contents

The Betraying Apostle: Judas Iscariot, p.	2
The Politicians: Annas and Caiaphas, High Priests, p.	27
Puppet Kings: The Herodians , p.	50
Judge of the Greatest of All Jews: Pontius Pilate, p.	64

The Betraying Apostle: Judas Iscariot

Our sources of information about the apostle who sold the Lord Jesus Christ to His enemies are the four evangelists and several psalms containing prophecies about Judas. These include Psalms 41, 69, and especially 109, known in the history of the church as the Psalm of Judas Iscariot, because in it David foretells, hundreds of years in advance, the life and acts of that apostle and because it is quoted several times in the New Testament as referring to Judas.

But we can also find out many things about Judas by looking into our own cheating and desperately sinful hearts, which resemble his.

Judas's Parents

Judas inherited an evil nature from his parents. Psalm 109 speaks about “their lawlessness” and about “his mother’s sin.” (v. 14)

All who plan to have children should think of this! Your sins make not only yourself but also your children miserable. Ham mocked and disrespected his father Noah. Canaan, his son, was cursed because of that sin. The parents’ sins are visited upon the children, just as the parents’ blessings are transmitted to the children. (Ex. 20:5, 6)

The Holy Scripture says that the children of believers are holy. (I Cor. 7:14) But what legacy do the children of nonbelievers receive? As youngsters they get accustomed to a sort of empty living and slide easily into wicked ways; thus their parents’ sins are visited upon them. The spiritual parent ought to be able to say to his children with a sanctified conscience, “Follow in my steps, as I follow in the steps of Christ.”

Judas was called Simon Iscariot. (John 6:71) This name is a distorted rendering of the Hebrew word *Sycarim* (**sykarios??**) in Greek. The Sycarims were a political party in Judea that struggled against the Romans, whom the Jews looked upon as their oppressors. Nationalism, a natural reaction on the part of such oppressed people, was at its highest pitch, and many Jews were involved in uprisings from time to time.

Judas's Childhood

Judas's nature is revealed in Psalm 109. Bad habits could be seen in him as he grew older. He was ruthless, oppressing those who were unfortunate and deprived. His tendencies were so evil that he was ready to kill a broken-hearted man. He apparently enjoyed cursing for its own sake, not only when he was angry.

Today there are many people caught up by the devil in this ugly sin. History records the name of a Roman officer, Cellatius, who in a moment of anger—or should it be called madness?—ordered his soldiers to shoot arrows at “the gods in the sky.” The soldiers obeyed the order and the arrows went up. But what happened? The arrows fell upon the heads of those who had shot them. The captain and several soldiers were killed, others injured. The one who curses and swears is just such a madman. A curse is an arrow against God which turns back upon the sweater's head and kills his soul. If people can forego cursing in the presence of a superior, is it not right for them to get rid of the habit altogether, remembering that the King of kings is always present and can hear?

If Judas enjoyed cursing, he had probably learned this from his father. Scripture tells only about “the sins of his parents.”

Are our children learning such bad things from us? I know of a child who, when a man asked him, “Whose child are you?” replied, “The devil's.”

“What is your name?”

“Satan.”

“Where do you live?”

“In hell.”

Curious about such answers, the man tried to find out more and learned that the child's mother shouted at her husband calling him “Devil” and “Satan.” Sometimes when they quarreled she cried, “Our house is hell.” The child raised in such an atmosphere accepted what he heard. How could he be expected to speak otherwise himself, as a child or an adult?

The same was true with regard to Judas. This did not mean he was without religion. On the contrary, he spent a certain time in prayer. (Ps. 109:7) He cursed and prayed too? Sadly, yes. How many today are like him? People bless God and with the same tongue curse individuals made in His image. In the epistle that bears his name, our Lord's brother James writes, “Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My

brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no fountain can yield both salt water and fresh. Who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done with meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.” (Jas. 3:10-14)

The prayer of a man like Judas is unacceptable to God. His prayer is even a sin before God. (Ps. 107:7) The sacrifice of a wicked person is abhorrent to God. It may be difficult to understand, but it is true. Someone asks, “Do I harm anyone when I pray? Can prayer be a sin?” The answer is simple: “Prayer is good, but not in the mouth of one who cursed five minutes before and would do so again.” God says to the wicked, “What right have you to do to declare My statutes, or take My covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction and cast My words behind you?” (Ps. 50:16)

Judas grew up like this: cursing and praying, with prayers not received by God.

Judas Comes to Jesus

As ardent Jewish nationalist must have been happy to hear that someone called Jesus was preaching, “The kingdom of heaven is nigh.” Such Jews understood that word according to their desires. They imagined Jesus would make Himself a king, chase the Romans out of Palestine, cause other nations to submit to the Jews, and thus bring in a new age for their people.

It’s no wonder that nationalists came to Jesus with enthusiasm! In their writings the first Christians stated that Judas was the one described by Luke as saying, “Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.” (Luke 9:57)

Seeing his ardor, Jesus warned him to consider well his decision: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head.” He drew attention to the fact that any follower of His would be deprived of many things.

To his credit, Judas Iscariot was not deterred by Jesus’ warning of hardships. At least, he was not afraid as long as he didn’t have to face them. He was brave only to boast. In the story of David and Goliath, it is recorded that the Israelites, against whom the Philistines had come, were issuing loud war cries. But when they saw Goliath, they ran away from him, “and a great fear seized them.” (I Sam. 17:20-24) Many of Jesus’

followers were like this: ready for sacrifice when sacrifice was not required of them. Later, His closest disciples all ran away when it was necessary to make a sacrifice, indeed. But Jesus received all, both good and bad.

Judas Becomes an Apostle

As He went about preaching for some time, Jesus started to build His church.

After praying for a whole night, He chose twelve disciples. One of the twelve was Judas, even though Jesus said, "I know those whom I have chosen."

Let us not be surprised that Jesus appointed a man who was weak, who was unable to resist temptation, and who eventually let himself be dominated by the devil. Under inspiration St. Paul wrote, "The members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary." (I Cor. 12:22) The Church is made not only of strong people, but also of weak people. There is no church without weak members. If the weak were absent. to whom would the strong show their love?

God made the body so that greater honor would be given to that part that lacked it. (I Cor. 22:24) Let us not wonder that weak people often hold high rank in the church, with outstanding seats. It is ordained that members less worthy of honor should be given honor.

The Lord Himself appointed Judas as His disciple.

One might ask why. The answer is simple. If the weak in faith accepts the gift of salvation and then gains respect and, even if undeserved, he will become stronger. And if one is prepared for the fall, God's plan will be fulfilled by the fact that honor is given to the undeserving and that traitors will live among Christians. The Scripture says, "He who ate bread with Me turned against Me." It is sad to see how a close friend can turn against his Christian fellow-believer.

But did Jesus know at the beginning that Judas would betray Him? And did He choose him as a disciples for this? Some people say yes.

David spoke prophetically for Jesus, saying, "Yes, my own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, who did eat of My bread, has lifted up his heel against Me." (Ps. 41:9)

This would seem to indicate that Jesus trusted Judas and did not think beforehand that he would betray Him. Therefore, He prepared him for this test.

God Has Not Destined Anyone for Hell

Some say Judas was doomed from the beginning and could not have acted differently. But how is this possible? Do they forget that God is full of mercy and love? Do they forget that Jesus went about doing nothing but good, that He died for all sinners without any exception? If an individual does not accept salvation, it is because he does not want it, not because God does not want it.

In fact, Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying, "I wanted to gather your children. . .but you did not want it." (Matt. 23:37) Jesus wants to save, but man does not want to be saved.

Man is free to choose. Judas was free too. He was not programmed to be a traitor. He himself bears the responsibility for becoming a traitor. Otherwise it would mean that Jesus was devious in receiving him among the disciples and appointing him as an apostle. He would have had to label him a son of damnation, meanwhile allowing him to delude himself into believing he was a disciple like the others. We cannot believe something like this about Jesus!

Psalm 41 says that Jesus showed trust in Judas, otherwise the first one entitled to complain would have been Judas himself. But he confessed, with his own tongue, after Jesus was crucified, "I have sold innocent blood." Therefore, he himself acknowledged that all the guilt belonged to him and not to God.

But Could Jesus Have Been Wrong?

If this is true, then Jesus was wrong for considering Judas a man worthy of trust when he was not. Was Jesus wrong? For the believer it is difficult even to pronounce such a word. But where there is love, there are certain "mistakes" that cannot be separated from it.

Love always makes for itself illusions, love always hopes where it seems there is no hope, and love is always tragically disappointed. The Bible is full of "illusions" on the part of the heavenly Father, followed by bitter disappointment. For example, God hoped that the house of Israel would bear good grapes, but the grapes were wild. He even asks, "Why did it bear wild grapes, when I was expecting it to bear good grapes?" (Isa. 5:2-4) The vineyard gravely disappointed God's expectations. God had had illusions about Israel that remained unfulfilled.

The night of Jesus' birth, an angel appeared to shepherds in Bethlehem and said, "I bring you good news which will bring great joy to all people." (Luke 2:10) That was what the angel proclaimed, according to his good heart, but this piece of news did not bring joy to the people. On the contrary, King Herod ordered the slaying of innocent children, parents were bereaved, and in the end the Jewish nation remained indifferent to the heavenly Babe. The angel of the Lord expected one thing, and the result was different. His heartfelt desires created an illusion.

After Jesus began His ministry He told the parable of the workers in the vineyard. (Matt. 21:1-39) He reminded His hearers that God sent one prophet after another to Israel, but all were abused or killed. The parable continues: "Finally, He sent His Son to them, saying: 'They will receive My Son, with honor.' But the workers, upon seeing the Son, captured Him took Him out of the vineyard, and killed Him." What was God's expectation, and what in fact happened?

The expectations of love are always disappointed in this cold, self-absorbed world. However, that does not mean love is wrong. It is always right, even in its illusions.

Jesus was naturally desirous of trusting Judas. Later, Judas proved to be unworthy of this trust.

Often we too deceive Him.

Judas Close to the Lord

Judas was close to Jesus now. Let us think well of this! Soon Judas was to become a devil. Then why should we get upset if we cannot have only angels around us? Let us withstand the devil, as Jesus resisted Judas's suggestions. He gave Judas full attention, just as He did the other disciples. When He gave them power over evil spirits, Judas was included, though he was a man weak in faith. Not only the strong in faith but also the weak are given this power. It is only necessary to have faith "as a mustard seed." Judas, like the other disciples, was given power over devils, power over the wiles of the enemy.

Jesus gives this power to us as well, to faithful Christians weak or strong. But you seldom find a man who uses this power.

It was written about Adam, "Let him have dominion. . . over all the beings that crawl on the earth." (Gen. 1:26) Yet it was a crawler, a snake, that caused his downfall

and took dominion over him—not because Adam did not have power to defeat it, but because he did not use what he was given.

Often we too allow ourselves to be mastered by things over which Jesus has given us power. Instead of using the strength the Savior provides over evil, many Christians have accepted teachings forged by devils that “it is impossible not to commit sin.” Since Scripture clearly states the contrary, some came up with another theory, namely, that the inner man does not commit sin, but rather the outward man. In other words, “I might be a thief and an adulterer outwardly, but I am a faithful Christian inside, even a servant of God.” What a fraud!

Scripture says, “Whoever abides in Him sins not; whoever sins has not seen Him, nor known Him. Little children, let no man deceive you: he who does righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous. He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever is born of God does not commit sin; for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, neither he that does not love his brother.” (I John 3:6-10)

Once he was received among Jesus’ disciples, Judas had access to the Source of strength not to commit sin, but he did not use that strength, just as many Christians today leave it unused.

The Love of Money

Judas let himself be tempted by money. Knowing his weakness, Jesus drew his attention to that sin many times. Once when He said to the disciples, “You have received the gospel without payment; you should give it without payment,” He looked at Judas significantly. Jesus supported him, defended him, prayed for him, waiting. . .

Judas was the first one to pluck heads of grain (“corn”) from a field on the Sabbath. Now, hunger can be supported for a time. However, Jesus did not allow him or the other disciples to be punished. As we see in David’s prophecy, we can easily imagine that Iscariot was the first who wanted to chase away the Canaanite woman who came to ask Jesus to cure her daughter. The woman might have thought, “Who is this hateful person in Jesus’ company?” But Jesus did not punish Judas.

In fact, Jesus does not judge anyone. Let us learn from Him to “judge not”—not even a Judas! “Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.” (Jas. 2:13) Are you ruthless? Then you will be judged ruthlessly. “It is with the judgment you judge that you will be judged.” (Matt. 7:2) Are you merciful? Then you will be judged mercifully. “Judge not that you be not judged.” (Matt. 7:1) If you do not judge anyone for anything, you will not be judged.

Judas held the purse of the small, incipient Church. But he was careless in handling the money. Jesus warned him that at the Last Judgment some people would be placed on the left, to whom the Son of Man would say, “Depart from me, you accursed people, into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. When I was hungry, you gave Me no food. I was thirsty, and you gave Me no drink. I was a stranger, and you did not welcome Me. I was naked and you did not clothe Me. I was sick and in prison, but you did not visit Me.” (Matt. 25:32, 41-43) It was for Judas that Jesus said those words, and for all the Judases after him.

But Judas did not keep before his eyes the judgment, where we shall all answer for the way we have treated the poor.

We quiet our conscience by tossing a few crumbs to the poor. For those who do so I would like to tell the following story, which took place in Bucharest in 1942. A lady in this capital city of Romania had a little cheese that had started to go stale. She was sorry to throw away the cheese, especially because there were a lot of poor people at that time. So she was very pleased when a poor man came into her yard. She immediately gave him all the cheese, and he left very happy. Then she went and bought herself another fresh loaf of cheese.

During the night she had a dream. She dreamt she died and went to heaven, where she saw a large table full of good things to eat. All the saved were gathered at that table, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob sitting at the head. Full of joy, she ran to take a seat. But an angel caught her by the sleeve and showed her to another lower table, saying, “My friend, sit there and eat your stale cheese.” When she awoke, she bore this lesson in mind. We too should remember not to give “stale cheese” to the poor.

Though Judas was a man who handled money poorly, Jesus nevertheless allowed him to hold the purse.

The Election: Saint or Devil?

Although Judas was a sinner, he was given the same promise as the other disciples. In the new world, “when the Son of Man shall sit on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Matt. 19:28)

So Judas was promised a throne. What should he have done now? It is said that when the princess Victoria was told she would be queen, she answered, “If that is the case, then I will be good.”

Everyone who learns that he will one day sit on a throne should make this decision. St. John says, “And every man that has this hope in Him purifies himself, even as He is pure.” (I John 3:3)

However, even with the promise of a throne, Judas did not cleanse his heart. Like many believers today, he must have entertained a devious teaching about the certainty of salvation. Such people imagine they can commit sin and still partake of God’s promises. Thus they turn Christ into a servant of sin. According to their understanding Christ is a wonderful being who offers you the opportunity to commit sin and then escape punishment by the fact that He died for you on the cross. The truth is that the one saved by Jesus’ blood should be purified from sin.

As for Judas, in the end he became so callused to the course he was taking that Jesus simply characterized him as a devil. His hard heart was a real stronghold of devils, who did whatever they pleased.

Judas continued as Jesus’ disciple, but in name only; he no longer served Him.

Such people, infected by the devil, have always been in the Church of Christ and in their haughtiness have continued to call themselves disciples, though full of sin. Moreover, these people often claim to improve on Christianity and make it more perfect. (Didn’t Judas criticize the waste in Magdalene’s expensive gift to Jesus? Didn’t he claim to be concerned about the poor?)

Many times they become founders of a new and better sect. There is nothing more dangerous than a man full of demons who pretends to be an apostle. The most fearsome thief is the one who pretends to be a policeman guarding the homes he steals from. Such

false apostles easily cheat people, because they are really religious—we saw how Judas behaved—but their religion is devilish.

This was Judas. And no wonder, because even Satan transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his servants also transform themselves into servants of righteousness. (II Cor 11:14, 15) But the marvel is that even if Judas deserved the name of devil, he could still have been saved. The Spirit of God kept him close to Jesus.

When others abandoned Jesus, Judas remained with the twelve. God would not let him go. The other disciples, who knew Judas's good and bad characteristics, accepted him because he wanted to follow the Savior. Peter, speaking on behalf of all the disciples, including Judas, said, "We believe and are sure that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (John 6:69) He believed in the loyalty of Judas.

However, Jesus warned them about guaranteeing one another, saying, "Haven't I elected you twelve? And one of you is a devil." (John 6:70)

Judas—on Top of His Sins

Jesus and His followers were poor, and their poverty was overwhelming for Judas. Perhaps an indicator of that poverty is the fact that Judas agreed to sell his Master for thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave. A man confident of his daily bread does not betray for so little money.

Judas was a thief. But he did not steal much. His robberies were only petty thefts. However, sin remains a sin; one can bear poverty without turning to theft. Judas, fearful of poverty, would by his betrayal separate himself from Christ forever.

It began in earnest in Bethany. When Jesus was sitting at table in the house of Simon the leper, a woman poured on His feet an alabaster vase full of expensive ointment, which represented about a year's wages. Judas was offended. "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor?" He said that not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief." (John 12:5)

Now we should not imagine that Judas said those words because he wanted to steal the money. The human soul is more complicated than that. It was something else. He who steals money set apart for the poor would like in his twisted mind to see others give more and more for the poor. No doubt Judas was often pressed by the problem of

poverty. That problem became all-consuming in time and displaced spiritual things in his mind. In his twisted rationalization he could not understand how one could spend money for anything other than food for the hungry poor and clothes for the naked shivering in the cold.

To Judas's question, "Why was not that ointment sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor?" Jesus answered with His usual gentleness. Yet there was something emphatic about His words. He must have looked squarely at Judas and made him understand that He knew all that tormented the wretched disciple's heart.

Judas could not stand it any longer. He could not abide the "waste" any more, which defied his poverty and others'. He knew the priests wanted to kill Jesus. After years of school, they knew God so well that their hearts burned with the desire to murder His Son. But they wanted to arrest Him in a place where there were no people and no danger of trouble.

On the other hand, it seems Jesus had taken certain preventive steps and was cautious about consequences. He said nothing about where He was to spend the night; only His disciples were familiar with this information. That is why the priests needed someone who would betray Him.

A thought came to Judas: Why not get some money selling Jesus? If only I had money! When this is the main objective, any means is good to reach it.

If only I had money! Isn't this the thought of many believers?

I remember a particular incident. A faithful peasant was once asked by a merchant, a "faithful" Christian himself, to be sheltered in his house for a few days. On that occasion the peasant spent a few hours every day in the merchant's store, which was close to the house. He saw that things were not in order there. The merchant sometimes encouraged evasion and did not stamp an invoice, or else he let a product leave the store without making out a bill, in order to save taxes, and so on. So the peasant took the merchant aside and asked him, "Are these things Christian, brother? These are not honest things."

The merchant answered, "You are a peasant and you don't know anything about business. All the merchants do these things. We have so many taxes that we could not run our business if we did not do this sometimes."

The peasant, a simple man, protested, “But if you cannot run a business without dishonest things, isn’t it better to give it up?”

The merchant took offense: “If I give up my business I won’t be able to make a living any more.”

The peasant, unable to accept the merchant’s account, asked again, “Isn’t it better to starve than to do dishonest things?”

The merchant would not even consider such an alternative. People are not seriously inclined to think that it is better to be poor and naked than to commit the slightest sin.

Judas was like the “Christian” merchant. And so he went to the temple to sell the Savior.

The Betrayal

There are some sins too grave for a man to carry on his conscience, such as murder. After killing his brother, Cain said, “My sin is too heavy to carry.” (Gen. 4:13, in the original). A man cannot walk in the world with the constant burden of having killed another human being. In one way or another, he has to put his conscience to sleep, either by blaming his victim or by getting drunk or drugged, or by deluding himself that his guilt has been relieved by religious ceremonies.

It is the same with betrayal, a sin too heavy for a man to bear. A disciple can sell the Savior for almost nothing, but his mind cannot bear the thought that he sold Him.

Judas’s corrupted mind thought up excuses to justify his traitorous act. Perhaps he said to himself on the way to the temple, “I have to tell the priests where Jesus is because if they come to arrest Him He will have to defend Himself. I cannot wait patiently any more for the Messiah to refrain from making a move. This drives me mad. At this rate, we will never bring in the kingdom of God. If I had half of Jesus’ power, I would not waste time talking to an old man at midnight or to an adulteress at a well at noon. I would make plans against Rome, and I would liberate the Jewish people. That is why I am going to the priests. They certainly will not be able to harm Him. Jesus will work a miracle and will not allow Himself to be put to death. I have seen Him bring back the dead. How could He go to death? Jesus will be grateful to me for what I have done, because my act

will make Him appear as a Savior before all the people and will inaugurate the kingdom of God.”

Perhaps it was with these thoughts in mind and the love of money in his heart that Judas went to the temple. But it was night, and the temple was closed and guarded by soldiers. He could not reach the high priest. Yet he had something urgent and important to communicate. To reach the high priest, Judas, who thought the betrayal would remain a secret between them, had to disclose the purpose of his visit to a soldier. What humiliation! To go from one mouth to another that a certain Judas, who wanted to talk to the high priest about selling his Rabbi, was waiting at the gate! He had not anticipated such an embarrassment.

Finally he was brought before the high priest, dressed in the priestly garments ordered by God. He took courage. “How can an agreement with God’s priests be betrayal?” he must have thought. “God’s will is now fulfilled in my act.”

The understanding with the priests was easy. Judas asked simply, “What will you give me if I deliver Him to you?” And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver.” (Matt. 26:15) His question told the priests from the very beginning that Judas, too rushed to be shrewd, did not need to be offered much. Their joy at being able to capture Jesus as they wished was great. Judas made them a beautiful Passover present. But why waste money uselessly if the joy comes cheap?

The price upon which they agreed was thirty silver coins, as had been prophesied, “And I said to them, If you think good, give me my price; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for My price thirty pieces of silver.” (Zach 11:12)

If was settled that Judas would find out where Jesus was to spend the night before Passover and would give them this information.

At the Same Table, Betrayer and Betrayed

From his talk with the priests Judas returned calmly to the disciples as if nothing had happened. He participated in all their talks regarding the coming kingdom, and he approached Jesus as he had done before. Someone would have needed a refined knowledge of the human soul to guess from some gesture or word of Judas that he was not his usual self. The disciples certainly considered him one of their own. At the supper before the Feast of Unleavened Bread, he was considered part of the close-knit group.

In our day there are many believers who commit the most terrible sins on the sly and then go to church and partake of Holy Communion. as if nothing had happened. But it has always been thus. The prophetic word must be fulfilled that says, “Yes, My own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, who did eat of My bread, has lifted up his heel against Me.” (Ps. 41:9)

Jesus Washes Judas’s Feet

During supper, Jesus, because He knew His “Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, got up from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. Then He poured water into a basin and started to wash His disciples’ feet and wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.” (John 13:3-5)

As Judas observed what Jesus was doing, all sorts of thoughts went through his mind. “How foolish of Jesus to lay aside His robes before washing our feet, as if to keep them clean. Who knows what will happen after tonight? But what can one know about His heart of wax? Maybe He knows what I have done. Maybe He thinks to keep His clothes unspotted for His capture by the priests. What stupid ideas are in my head today! Why am I so tormented? All this washing of feet is senseless. He says He is the Messiah, yet He is doing things any Jewish slave would refuse to do. This is so humiliating. Soon we will be shown whether or not He is the Messiah.”

He was especially impressed by the fact that Jesus carefully wiped everyone’s feet after washing them. Surely Judas understood what Jesus wanted to show by this. The Savior wiped away the proof of His work. After He washes someone, He—in effect—destroys the evidence that the person was dirty and needed cleansing. Thus it appears that the man never was filthy. Perhaps the thought crossed his mind, for a moment, “Jesus would do this to my sin if I confessed it to Him. It would remain buried between the two of us. It would never be mentioned. Everything would be forgiven and forgotten.”

But pride made him reject this thought immediately.

Now Jesus was washing Peter’s feet, and explaining to him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.” (John 13:8)

“If Jesus is indeed the Messiah, that means I shall not have a part in His kingdom if He does not wash me. It is enough for Him to wash me. One word of His is enough. And He says words of forgiveness with so much love.

“But no, I cannot go back. I gave my word to the priests that I would deliver Him to them. Would it not be a shame to break my word?”

It is true that some people are careful to keep all sorts of criminal or stupid promises, as if the most important thing is to keep your word, not to try to seek justice.

Finally Jesus washed the feet of Judas, who received the act with thanks, like all the others. He did not betray himself. He retained his composure and above all his stupid pride. He saw before him the Creator of heaven and earth, now meek as a slave, and he, the creature, was too proud to acknowledge his sin.

Discovery of the Traitor

After washing the feet of the Twelve, Jesus put His robes back on and sat at table again.

As they were eating, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, one of you will betray Me.” Now it was apparent that Jesus knew everything. That is why He uttered that difficult word.

But if Jesus knew everything, why did He say, “One of you *will* betray Me?” Why the future tense? The betrayal was already arranged.

God judges in one way, people in another. We usually label a man a sinner or criminal when he steps on the path of evil, often based only on a simple unchecked rumor. But Jesus does not act like this. He knew what Judas had done, but He did not say someone had sold Him, but only that someone would sell Him. Because the sin had not been fully consummated—Judas had taken the money but had not yet informed the priests of Jesus’ whereabouts—Jesus was patient. He still hoped Judas would change his mind and renounce going to the priests to fulfill his base promise. He could return the money. The betrayal had not yet been committed. Jesus the compassionate would not say Judas had sold Him, but only that he would do so.

Startled, the disciples began to ask, one after another, “Lord, is it I?” Jesus spoke of the future, and each wondered sadly if deep down in his evil heart he could commit such a wretched sin if God did not stop him.

To sell another, to betray another—this was not only the sin of Judas. It is a sin we all commit. Man is always a traitor deep within his innermost being. Man’s herd-like instinct keeps him from true loyalty. We live under the dictatorship of those around us. Like Peter, we say of the one not present, “I do not know the man.” We sacrifice the rights of the absent one to defend himself.

The disciples began to question the wretchedness of their own hearts. We too should ask the question, “Lord, is it I?”

Their humility absolves the disciples of guilt. The psalmist says, “Happy is the man who fears endlessly.” Happy are those who do not trust themselves, who are broken-spirited, who wonder if they are not ready for betrayal.

If while reading this you have asked yourself the disciples’ heartfelt question, know that you can commit great sins, as did the eleven disciples, you can find opportunity to stumble, you can forsake Him like Peter—but the word is clear: “Have they stumbled that they should fall?” (Rom. 11:11) A meek and humble man who knows the wickedness of his heart would not sell His Lord. And a person aware of his evil tendencies would not let such weeds grow around his heart.

To the disciples’ question about their loyalty, Jesus replied, “He that dips his hand with Me in the dish, the same shall betray Me.” This is the traitor’s sign forever. It is written about a king, “Yes, those who eat of the portion of his delicacies shall destroy him. . . Both these king’s hearts shall be bent on evil, and they shall speak lies at the same table.” (Dan. 11:26, 27)

There are all sorts of strange signs to recognize betrayal. Another sign is the brotherly kiss received from the traitor.

Jesus gave Judas due warning: “The Son of Man goes as it is written of Him: but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.” (Matt. 26:24)

The traitor’s sin will serve to fulfill the Scriptures, says Jesus. God can use men’s sins to accomplish His purposes. Men’s sins only reveal God’s righteousness. But this is no reason to commit sin.

God cannot be faulted for foretelling the betrayal of His Son, and the prophecy had to be fulfilled. We may wonder then about Judas’s responsibility. God’s ability to

foretell the future is one thing, but man is still responsible for his acts. If I offer a bone to a hungry dog, I know it will come to get the bone. But it comes not because of what I know, but because it is hungry. Thus, God prophesies that one of the disciples will betray Jesus, but God's prediction did not turn Judas into a traitor. Rather, it was his greediness for money and power that produced the terrible act.

Jesus says it would have been better for such a man not to have been born. There were prophets who, viewing the opposition of the world to their calling, wished they had not been born. For betrayers, and only for them, it would have been better not to have been born.

Judas's pride will again be revealed. Hearing Jesus' words, "One of you will betray Me," all the disciples had asked, "Lord, is it I?" If Judas did not ask that question, he could have been suspected by the others. That is why he too said, "Rabbi, is it I?"

What vanity! Within two hours all would be discovered. But for Judas's soul, it was very important to maintain the respect of the other disciples, at least for those final hours. That is why he pretended to be innocent of the charge.

Nothing is hidden that will not be revealed. How much wiser it would have been for Judas to confess his sin rather than to run after the honor granted for one brief moment. For us too it is wiser to confess our sins than to pretend to be what we are not before our fellow men for one short life. At the last judgment the sins of everyone who has rejected salvation will be revealed.

We should note that, whereas all the disciples called Jesus "Lord," Judas calls Him "Rabbi," or Master.

There is a great difference between these two titles. Jesus was "Lord." A man has more freedom with a Rabbi. If he does not like his teaching, he can walk away from him. For Judas, Jesus was not Lord, but only Rabbi. He did not approve of Jesus' teachings. It was easy to forsake Him.

The condition of your faithfulness to Jesus is that He must be your Lord and you His servant (slave, in the original), no matter what He requires of you.

"Rabbi, is it I?"

“Yes,” Jesus answered. “It is.” And He gave him a morsel of food they were eating. It must have been a terrible moment for Jesus. How He must have hoped for one sign of repentance from Judas! But it did not come.

So He said to him, “Do quickly what you are about to do.” Quickly! It is now the cry of Jesus’ soul. The anticipation of misfortune is often much heavier to bear than the misfortune itself. Jesus wanted to hurry up the process.

Judas felt he had received clear guidance from Jesus. That guidance was not to repent but to carry out his sinful plan.

Let us be very careful about receiving guidance from God! Such leadings depend upon our inner state. St. Paul writes to some Christians who had been pagans, “You were led astray to dumb idols.” (I Cor. 12:2)

God has all sorts of leadings. For example, it is written in the Bible, “He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still; and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is holy, let him be holy still.” (Rev. 22:11) This too is a guidance from God. But woe to the one who receives such guidance on the negative side.

When Jesus said to Judas, “Do quickly what you are about to do,” His words should have been a warning to Judas not to carry out his dreadful plan. But Judas, who had already rebelled against his Rabbi, was prepared to follow up on such guidance. That being the case, it was best that he accomplish quickly what he had contracted to do. This is the request, the final request, of Jesus to traitors of all times: “If you want to sell Me, do it quickly. Don’t torture Me like this.”

But none of those who were sitting at the table understood why Jesus said such words to Judas. Some thought that because Judas had the purse He was saying, “Buy all that is necessary for the feast” or get what was needed for the poor. (John 13:28, 29) The eternal tragedy! No one understands Jesus. Instead of admitting that they did not understand His words, the disciples, like many of us today, interpret them according to their own biases.

After accepting the morsel of food, Judas left in a hurry. It was dark outside. Leaving the upper room, Judas finally passed from light to darkness, a sign of the darkness of his future .

After he had left, one can imagine that Jesus sighed deeply with relief. The significant thing is not simply that He would be betrayed, but that His Church had been relieved of a traitor. That is why the Lord's first words after Judas's departure were, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified." (John 13:31)

All the significant teachings John recorded (chapters 14-16 of the Gospel) were given by Jesus to the disciples after Judas left. Today He gives His disciples more exalted teachings only after the Judases have departed.

After a profoundly moving prayer, Jesus left with His disciples for the garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus' Arrest

Gethsemane—"wine press"—was a place well known to Judas. In the dark of night, he led a mob across the Kidron valley and up the hill to the secluded spot. Finally Judas got to be first!

The band of Roman soldiers along with officers of the chief priests came armed with swords and clubs and torches. It is easy to understand. Judas probably warned them that the One they were about to arrest was able to work miracles. Weapons might prove useful. Since the Roman soldiers did not know Jesus, the traitor had given them a sign: The One I kiss is the Man you should arrest.

Why did Judas choose this very strange sign? Was it because he wanted to fulfill the commandment in Psalm 2:12: "Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish from the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little"? Possibly. Many people have petty thoughts of this kind. They think that by fulfilling some commandment God will not be angry at them. Others give their wickedness free rein. But there is another possibility: that Judas continued to love Jesus, even while betraying Him. Jesus is worthy of all kinds of love, even that of His betrayer.

As far as the biblical record is concerned, Jesus received the last kiss on earth from Judas. He had long desired kisses. That is why His Spirit inspired the psalmist to write, "Kiss the Son." That is why He gave us lips—to kiss. To kiss Him. To kiss those He entrusted to our love. Husbands are given lips to kiss their wives, not to nag them. Simon the Pharisee was rebuked by Jesus: "You have not kissed me." How difficult it is to desire kisses and be unable to inspire them.

We know of only two people who kissed Him: Mary, who kissed His feet because she loved Him, and Judas Iscariot, who kissed His cheek in a gesture of betrayal to the arresting soldiers. Since that time many have kissed Him in the person of members of His spiritual body, some with the kiss of Mary, some of Judas.

Jesus received both kisses. We too must learn to receive both the kisses of brotherly love and those of the hypocrite.

After receiving Judas's kiss, the Savior made another attempt to turn him from his evil path. He called him "Friend." (Matt. 26:50) The evangelist Matthew uses this word three times. (Matt. 20:13; 22:12; and here) In all three cases, the word is not an empty formula but the expression of a relationship that one of the parties has disregarded.

The word "friend" addressed to Judas should have reminded him of the many holy duties he betrayed.

"Friend, do what you came to do." These words had significance. Several metal cups from Jesus' time have been uncovered in digs made in Palestine. Many of them bear the inscription, "Do what you came to do." It is assumed that it was an ordinary pub joke urging drinkers not to spend time in idle talk but to drink heavily. Today one finds similar jokes among drunkards, often displayed in pubs: "If you drink, you die; if you do not drink, you die." Or, "Better dead drunk than dead without drinking."

It is easy, then, to understand what happened. Perhaps the host of Jesus and His disciples did not have enough cups for so many guests for the Last Supper and borrowed cups from a neighborhood pub, as we might do today.

The cup from which the disciples served the last supper must have had the inscription, "Do what you came to do." There may have been talk about that phrase at the table. Jesus saw Himself betrayed by a kiss. He made one last appeal to Judas, reminding him in effect that they both drank from the same cup. "Will you sell the One with whom you shared the cup?"

This could be the meaning. Otherwise, the words "Do what you came to do" are meaningless. Judas had already done what he came to do: he had identified the Man to be arrested.

The Repentance

Jesus was taken, and the mob left with Him. No voices were heard now. The other disciples had fled, and Judas was alone in the garden where his Master had prayed and wept. In the now silent night, the light of the full moon lent great loneliness to the garden after the commotion of the previous hour. Judas has time to contemplate the events of his three years with the Savior, now so tragically ended. Echoes of the loving voice of the betrayed Rabbi, memories of His incomparable goodness, the consciousness of future judgment, with a white throne, a righteous Judge, the universe gathered for the trial, the punishment of the guilty and reward of the saved—all this must have tormented his heart and mind. With the thirty pieces of silver in his pocket, Judas had no peace and could not enjoy it.

It is always like this with sin. Man can commit sin but cannot enjoy it, because remorse follows.

Judas was seized by remorse, but he did not repent. Remorse and repentance are completely different. What is the difference?

When a person repents, it is like seeing a spot on a white coat, which he washes immediately. David, after committing the sin with Bathsheba, prayed, “Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.” (Ps. 51:9) A repentant heart admits that sin springs completely from an evil being, whereas the false heart feels remorse for a given sin, but nothing else.

Judas deplored his betrayal but said no word about his thefts, his wickedness, and his hypocrisy.

While repentance is related to faith and hope, remorse is without faith or the hope that one can still be restored. Judas had remorse, but he did not believe in Jesus Christ as the Savior for sinners; he had no hope that he could still be forgiven.

It is in this respect that the repentance of Peter, who denied his Lord, is different from Judas’s. Remorse led Judas to repair his sin to the degree possible by returning the price of betrayal to the priests. That was a very significant gesture, since repentance should involve restitution for past sins. Peter, on the other hand, did not go back to the servants to apologize for his profane and lying words. How is it, then, that Peter’s repentance was received, while Judas’s was not?

Peter, after his denial, retained his faith and came back to Jesus. Judas did not believe, but went to atone for his betrayal. Peter's salvation was that he returned humbly to Jesus, and after finding acceptance let the past be the past. Time softened the pain.

Judas's repentance may have been sincere, but he did not take it to the only One who could have accepted it and saved him.

Jesus appreciated Peter's repentance; He talked to him and probed his soul. By contrast, how little the priests cared about Judas's repentance! They had no understanding of or compassion for his regrets. When Judas went back to them with the thirty silver pieces of silver and said, "I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood," they replied coldly, in spite of the favor he had done them, "What is that to us? You see to it!" (Matt. 27:3, 4) With these careless words, the priests, whose duty was to bring a sacrifice for the sins of the people, dismissed a repentant sinner.

"What do we care? It's your business." What a terrible answer! Those who have served this world often hear this answer on their deathbed when, seized by the horror of the Judgment they are facing, they cry to the world to help them. What does the world care that another soul goes to hell because of the delusion of worldly lusts? This is the answer that the wretched Judas received from his former companions in sin. They would not help him in the hour of death. Their only response was, "What do we care? It's your business."

But the faithful soul hears His Master say at the hour of death, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord." (Matt. 25:21)

What a difference!

The End

Not finding any comfort from the priests, Judas threw down the silver coins in the temple, thus defiling it forever. But the bargain he had made about Jesus' life could not be undone. He gave back the money of betrayal, but he could not get back his throne in the kingdom of heaven, which he lost by selling out his Lord. Faithless and hopeless, he went out and hanged himself.

How incomprehensible that the disciple of such a Master could have such a terrible end. Even the rope with which he hanged himself did not hold. He fell headlong to the ground, his belly burst open, and all his entrails gushed out. (Acts 1:18)

Who could have imagined such an end for that man, the day he was elected a disciple? Who would have thought it possible, the evening before, when Jesus washed his feet, or a few hours before, when he was in Jesus' arms in Gethsemane and was called "Friend"?

He had been prepared for a throne, not for age-long infamy, not for a hasty grave. Now the hanging rope of the betrayer in turn betrayed him.

Beware of making bad deals. Esau sold his right of first-born for a bowl of lentil soup. Judas sold a throne in the kingdom of heaven for thirty pieces of silver. Let us beware of the bargains we make. "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" (Matt. 16:26)

Woe, woe, Judas! Why did you bring such misfortune to your soul? It was not necessary to have such an end, though you lived as I have described you. If only you could have looked just once at Jesus in the Praetorium, when the Roman soldiers put a crown of thorns on His head and a broken reed in His hand. Wonder of wonders! Jesus did not throw away the torn reed, as He could have done, but grasped it in His hand for sinners to understand, for you, Judas, to understand, that Jesus would not bruise a broken reed. You, Judas, were that broken reed that Jesus wanted to hold in His hand.

Instead, in your despair, you committed suicide.

It is possible that someone reading these lines might recognize certain features of his own soul, hopelessly evil. There is no reason to be in despair. Any bite of the serpent, the devil, can be cured. God told Adam that the serpent—namely, sin—can bite only the heel of a man, which does not kill if he immediately goes to Jesus, who cures the wound with His shed blood.

He died on the cross for our sins.

I can tell you from my own experience that I too was a great sinner. I too crucified Jesus by my sins, my lawlessness. I did many things I came to regret. But I allowed the blood that flowed from His wounded side to clear my sin, even the sin of crucifying the

Son of God. Along with the angels and saints in the kingdom of God, I was able to accept Jesus' legacy of eternal life.

Everyone can receive the gift of salvation, even the man who is convinced that he is a son of perdition, like Judas. It is written about the Pharisees that they hindered God's plan for them, a plan for their salvation. So too you can hinder God's plan for your damnation—indeed, if such a plan existed. But there is no such plan, because God wants all people everywhere to repent and receive salvation.

Judas had a tragic ending that brought great offense to his wife and children. The curse of the psalmist came true in his life: “Let their habitation be desolate, and let none dwell in their tents. For they persecute Him, whom You have smitten; and they talk to the grief of those whom You have wounded. Add iniquity to their iniquity; and let them not come into Your righteousness. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous.” (Ps. 69:25-28)

The high priests saw the trace of blood on the coins but not in their souls. What blindness! After talking among themselves, they purchased the potter's field with it as a place to bury strangers. “Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.” (Matt. 27:6-8) The prophecy of Jeremiah came true then: “And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore that field was called, The field of blood, unto this day. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of Him that was valued, whom they of the children of Israel did value; and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord appointed me.” (Matt. 27:7-10)

Many have observed that these words, attributed by Matthew to the prophet Jeremiah are not explicitly in his book, but in that of the prophet Zechariah. However, the prophecy stands. The tragedy is that Judas Iscariot turned his heart to stone and played his part to the bitter end.

Son of Perdition

In researching the life of Judas Iscariot it will be useful to understand a difficult fragment from the writings of Paul, in which, speaking of the last apostasy, he mentions “the son of perdition,” a title Jesus gave to Judas. (See II Thess. 2:3)

He says that before the end there will be an apostasy, a forsaking of faith so great that there will be a question whether the Son of Man will find at least a little faith on earth when He returns. (Luke 18:8)

The apostasy will involve a category of people called collectively “the lawless one, the son of perdition.” In many other parts of Scripture singular names are sometimes used to refer to a group.

Lawless men are those of whom Jesus spoke in Matthew 24:12, 13. They are Christians who, though they bear this title with pride, cause the love of many to grow cold because of increasingly lawless acts and compromise in their lives that betray the Savior and the Church. These are Christians who, like the Jews who crucified Jesus, support their Christian law, boast about knowing the will of Christ, flatter themselves as guides of the blind and the light of those in darkness, turn religion into a business—all with the result that the name of God is despised among the nations.

To identify this apostasy Paul uses the same name Jesus gave to Judas: son of perdition. They are people who, like Judas, mix the Christian faith with all sorts of vain passions and desires. They retain the old wickedness in their hearts. They are disciples who do not use the power the Savior provides to defeat sin in their heart. They crave money rather than winning souls for Christ. They are ready to sell their own souls and the good name of Jesus and His Church for thirty pieces of silver. They do not have a saving belief in the blood Jesus shed on the cross.

This mentality leads a person or group to become “a son of perdition,” like Judas.

Jesus’ second coming is prepared by such a category of apostates, who rise above all that is good, above love and light. They do not consider that without love, without light, without beauty, everything else is without value. They do not look for things worthy of worship, of honor, of being loved, the good deeds serving to praise God, or “all that is called God,” to use Paul’s words. They exalt themselves above all else and claim the right to be called Christians, and even apostles of Christianity.

They even pretend to be God. Now, Scripture does call some people gods, in a number of places. It says about Moses that he was a god for his brother Aaron. It calls those to whom the Law speaks gods, namely, His elect. The Christian is a god, that is, an empowered representative of the Deity before the non-Christian world.

But the Third Commandment says, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” You should not call yourself an envoy empowered by God, a child of God, a teacher of godly things, unless you have love and light within. Otherwise you commit lawlessness.

The appearance of the lawless man, the son of perdition will not be something unexpected in the end of times. Nineteen hundred years ago the apostle said, “The mystery of lawlessness has already started working” (II Thess. 2:7), and it has made great progress since then. It only remains for the faithful Christians, who uphold the banner of truth, to be removed from its path. That is why there is violent oppression in many countries against this remnant, with the help of the state, thus fulfilling Daniel’s prophecy that describes a struggle against the saints and even the Lord of lords. (Dan. 8:24-26)

When the lawless one is revealed, the Lord will consume him with the breath of His mouth and will destroy him by the brightness of His coming. (II Thess. 2:8)

A study of the life of Judas, the disciple-turned-traitor, will make it easy for the faithful Christian today to recognize lawless people, sons of perdition, and will help them shun the delusions of lawlessness that cheat people with exalted titles and enable them to embrace more ardently the love of truth.

It is my prayer that this research may be useful to you, the reader.

A few more words about Judas.

Jesus said to His disciples, speaking of Judas, “One of you is a devil [*diabolos*, in Greek].” It has been noted that wherever the New Testament writes about gossips and defamation, the Greek word *diabolos* is used. There is no other word for slanderer in the New Testament, so “slanderer” and “devil” are one and the same; they are synonymous, according to Jesus. One could as well say, “One of you is a slanderer.” Maybe slander was the first sign of the demonic in Judas’s character after he became a disciple of Jesus.

Therefore slander is not an insignificant offense. In fact, it is a devilish work. Let us beware!

The High Priests Annas and Caiaphas

The priesthood in Israel was ordered by God Himself. however, it often played a base part in the history of this people. For example, during the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the priests actually participated in plans to kill the prophet.

In point of fact, the priesthood is almost always in conflict with the faith it seeks to serve. By their nature, priests represent the religion they have inherited. Therefore, they guide themselves according to laws and traditions that were settled in the past. The law of life is the spirit, which is in continuous change toward perfection and works in believers and in the prophets who rise among them.

The very role of the priesthood is to defend the godly order of their religion. But this can be done only by clearing the past, letting go of the traditions that have accumulated and allowing the Spirit room to move. In countries where people have been given titles of nobility such as baron, count, or lord, they usually disavow their past as commoners. Likewise, priests cling to their positions of status and prestige.

But the living God is concerned with growth and development, not maintaining the status quo. He wants to be involved in the life of His people, enabling them to grow and reach perfection.

Serious conflicts often appear between believers and priests in a given religion. Meanwhile, truth tries to make room for itself.

In Jesus' day conflict might well have been expected, because the priesthood had become very decadent. Even the Talmud condemned them.

In addition, according to the Talmud, the temple of Jerusalem could not bear so many sins, and at a certain moment a voice came from Scripture, "Sons of Eli, who defile the house of the Lord, leave this place." This essential book of the Pharisees describes Annas and Caiaphas in these words: "They are high priests, their sons are treasure holders, their sons-in-law are the matchmakers of the temple, and their servants are clubbing the people."

The Gospels conceal the sins of the priests. If we read only the Gospel story we would not know how corrupted they had become. But the Talmud and the history of the Jews describe things as they were during the time of the second temple. No high priest kept his office for more than one year. The priesthood was purchased with money. Even Joseph, called Caiaphas, the high priest who tried Jesus, was removed from his office shortly after the crucifixion and was killed. The high priests were looked upon as simple officials doing their job.

Jesus was careful not to hurt the priests, though He knew how corrupt they were. He told the cured leper to take gifts to the covetous priests. Yet the priests were not satisfied with this. They feared that Jesus' preaching would lead the poor to rise up against their greed for money and would replace the priests' mediation with the gospel of faith in the name of Jesus.

Although Jesus respected the priests, they felt that any simple preaching of faith by Him touched their immediate interests. Therefore, they developed an organized hatred for Him.

Of course, there were divine reasons for this conflict to be aroused. It had been ordained by God that Jesus Christ be crucified on earth because of human wickedness, and that His blood had to serve for the redemption of our sins. The earthly cause of this hatred by the priesthood has been described.

The Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin represented the actual government of the Jewish people. It had been invested by God with complete authority.

It was written in the law, "If there arise a matter too hard for you in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within your gates: then you shall arise and get up into the place which the Lord your God shall choose; and you shall come to the priests the Levites, and to the judge that shall be in those days, and inquire; and they shall show you the sentence of judgment. And you shall do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the Lord shall choose shall show you; and you shall observe to do according to all that they inform you: According to the sentence of the law which they shall teach you, and according to the judgment which they shall tell you, you shall do; you shall not decline from the sentence which they shall show you, to the right hand, or to the left. And the man who will do presumptuously, and will not hearken to the priest that stands to minister there before the Lord your God, or to the judge, even that man shall die; and you shall put away the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously." (Deut. 17:8-13)

The Sanhedrin was the highest court of law for the people.

But there was no longer any such legal system in Jesus' time. Members of the last Sanhedrin had been killed thirty-five years before His birth.

What was called the Sanhedrin now was an accidental assembly of priests, scholars, and rabbis, some of whose names were recorded. There was Rabbi Johanan ben Zaccai (called John in Acts 4:6), a man completely dedicated to some Kabalistic speculations, who was an easy tool in the hands of those with evil intentions. There were the five sons of the high priest Annas, who was old; they reached such a high position because they were sons of a high priest. There was Ishmael ben Phabi, the most elegant man of his time. One single coat of his was valued at 100 mines (perhaps about a million dollars). There were also Isabar of Kefar Barkai, who reached the position of high priest later, but who wanted to make sacrifices wearing silk gloves lest he defile his hands. His hands were barbarously cut by King Agrippa.

Annas, the high priest during Jesus' childhood, whom the Savior must have seen when He visited the temple at the age of twelve, played an important part in that informal Sanhedrin. Now he was old. His five sons later became high priests themselves. Annas means "the merciful" in Hebrew. Many times in this world the most beautiful names are given to people who do not deserve them. In the Talmud we find these lines written about them: "Woe upon Annas's house, woe upon their curses, woe upon their snake-like bites!"

The chairman of the Sanhedrin was Joseph, called Caiaphas, namely, "the oppressor," high priest in office at the time of Jesus' trial.

Considering the foregoing, it is easy to form an opinion about what kind of people were Jesus' other judges.

The Talmud says directly, "Only people who can prove that a thing is clean, although it is not clean, should be elected in the Sanhedrin."

That describes the highest court of law of the people of Israel. No nation at that time had such a pure religion as the Jews. The Sanhedrin, though corrupt, was far better than the systems of other nations, plunged in the darkness of paganism. There was no other court of law more religious and more respected on the whole earth. It was considered the oracle of the world. Every one of its sentences was "God's decision." It

was considered the defender of justice. Yet it was this court that condemned Jesus to death.

“Good” People

Members of this Sanhedrin were probably not much worse than people we consider honorable and respectable today. Looking back, we can see that they were sinners. However, we recognize that we are all sinners, “respectable” or not, according to the prophet’s word: “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.” (Isa. 64:6) Jesus’ ordeals showed how much baseness there was among these “good” people.

But, you ask, can we be compared to the members of the Sanhedrin? They were corrupt and self-serving, whereas we consider ourselves good people.

But what in their character pushed them to condemn and kill Jesus? What were their sins? They were the very sins that every “good-hearted” person has today. Who among us does not think of himself as far more worthy than the members of the Sanhedrin? Who does not have his prejudices against some people or against the gospel? Who does not judge in a hurry, as did the Sanhedrin? Who does not consider his decisions of great importance? Who does not find it difficult to embrace new ideas that do not match long-held beliefs? Who is not heedless, to a certain extent, of the sufferings of others if they are necessary for the cause we endorse? Then we are just like the members of the Sanhedrin.

The rejection and final crucifixion of Jesus was not due to a special wickedness on the part of the Jews or Romans, to a special lawlessness of the Sanhedrin, but, as we shall see, to the very ordinariness of things. If Jesus were to come into the world today, to any other nation, He would doubtless be received in the same way.

The assembly of the high priests rejected Him because of their selfish decision to maintain their fragile position of authority, dignity and wealth at all cost under Roman sovereignty, and to destroy any movement that might trouble their Roman masters. Similarly, people today of all types sacrifice their principles, views, and even faith to retain high positions, jobs, power, popularity, or income.

The Pharisees rejected Jesus because it was difficult for them to admit their deep mistakes, which He revealed. As “true believers,” they refused to re-think the issues of religion from the beginning. Instead, they were willing to condemn a Man who, in their eyes, was a simple layman, a carpenter without education. Who among us makes haste to admit his own mistakes? Who among us is ready to reconsider the grounds of our belief system just because a simple man comes and presents things from another point of view? Most of us are too lazy to do this. We cling to what we know, just like the Pharisees.

The multitudes rejected Jesus, first of all because they had their worldly occupations and would not make the effort to understand the deep truths Jesus taught. Second, they maintained a stubborn nationalism, different from Christian nationalism today, which looks to the welfare of one’s own nation, without despising other nationalities. They had wild hopes to oppress others, hopes that blinded them to the spiritual path presented by Jesus. Third, they yielded to the spirit of the mob. In our age we are well aware of the terrible results of mob psychology. In a mob setting, people of good will yield to impulses they would normally shun and lose their inhibitions to commit acts of violence. If someone shouts, “Crucify Him!” they join in the chorus that echoes “Crucify!”

Today the mob spirit is evidenced by the propaganda, slogans, and hate-mongering of blind nationalism in many parts of the world.

The reasons why various types of people rejected Jesus exist in our society today.

Members of the Sanhedrin who condemned Jesus are no different from “good” people in the world today. By reading what they did, perhaps some can look into their own souls and see themselves for what they truly are.

Rumors about Jesus

Caiaphas the high priest knew that he was called by God to watch over the destruction of the Jewish people. He had heard a lot of rumors about a certain Jesus, who was the son of a carpenter in a small town, had gathered a few disciples around Him, and claimed to be the Messiah.

Caiaphas thought this claim was of course ridiculous. Could it be that the Savior of the world, who was to inherit the throne of King David, was just an ordinary man? Not only was Jesus poor and without status, but He was not even a holy man. Envoys from

the Sanhedrin observed that both He and His disciples broke the Sabbath, that everlasting sign between God and the people of Israel. It was also certain that Jesus did not respect the holy traditions on fasting, washing of hands and bowls. Although the Bible clearly says in Psalm 1: “Blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful,” Jesus, the so-called Messiah, was friend to all the customs clerks, tax collectors, and sinners. He ever ate and drank with them.

According to Caiaphas’ thinking, Jesus’ speech was that of a vain man; indeed, it was often blasphemous.

More than once He said to an individual, “Your sins are forgiven,” when it is known that only God can forgive sins and then only through the mediation of the priests, based upon the sacrifice made in the temple. In addition, He was making some really wild promises: “Whoever believes in Me will have eternal life.” What impudence! Are we Jews to believe in a mere man? Doesn’t the Bible say, “Cursed be the man who believes in man”? The titles that Jesus gave Himself exhibited an incomprehensible conceit: “I am the Bread of life”; “I am the Water of life”; “I am the Light of the world.”

And yet that same Jesus said of us, the priests and scholars, that we were seeking glory. According to His own words, He should first acknowledge His own faults before looking elsewhere. Even if some priests had their shortcomings—and who doesn’t?—no one is as proud as He is. His pretensions reached a climax when He said in front of a crowd that the priests and scholars were hypocrites and a generation of vipers. Thus, He undermined the prestige of a divinely ordained priesthood. Where will people go when they lose trust in their leaders? These are troublous times. Who knows what can happen if someone lights a spark of revolt among the people?

Amazing miracles were reported about this Jesus. But the Pharisees explained them simply: They pertain to the forces of darkness, headed by Beelzebub, lord of the devils. Jesus did His miracles through these powers of darkness. Caiaphas, a Sadducee, believed neither in resurrection nor in spirit, like many people today. He was convinced that all Jesus’ wonders were artful tricks. Even though He raised some from the dead, nothing could convince the high priest that the long-expected Messiah could be a man

without status, “unholy,” conceited, an enemy of the priesthood ordained by God, and a rebel.

The Sanhedrin in Conference

The activity of such a man should have been stopped long since. That is why the most important priests, headed by Caiaphas and the Pharisees, gathered the council together and said, “What shall we do? For this Man does many miracles.” (John 11:47)

In answer, the Pharisees said Jesus’ wonders were evil. As a matter of fact, the Talmud mentions them too. But these leaders were afraid of the miracles, because they went against their teaching. So they argued among themselves, “What shall we do?”—as if it were possible to do something against a miracle-worker who could even bring the dead back to life! One of them added, “If we let Him alone like this, all will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and destroy us, our place and our nation.” (John 11:48, in the original).

It is to our great discredit that we so often ask this kind of question. Instead of asking what is right or not right, regardless of consequences, we ask first, “What are the consequences to us if we follow this or that path?” If the wrong way seems to have better consequences, we choose accordingly—just like the priests and Pharisees.

They claimed to fear a Roman takeover of “us, our place and our nation.” Please note the order of their concerns as they reveal their priorities: us, our positions, our nation.

They were sitting in the seat of Moses, subject to God, but far from His manner of thinking. Centuries earlier, the tribes of Reuben and Gad came before Moses and requested that they be given land on the east bank of the Jordan, saying, “Here we shall build stables for our cattle and cities for our babies; then we shall get armed in a hurry and shall go before the children of Israel.” Moses corrected them gently: “Build cities for your babies and stables for your cattle.” (Num. 32:16-24) Babies first, then cattle.

For the priests and the Pharisees, first came “I,” then “place” and finally “the nation.” Such people know each other too well to honor one another or maintain the facade of courtesy.

Suddenly Caiaphas the high priest stood up in the council and said bluntly, “You don’t know anything! Don’t you know it is for your benefit (that is, for the priests and the

Pharisees) that one single man die for the people?” Jesus’ death had to be useful to the priests and Pharisees. But it was not politic to say so directly. Couldn’t this crime acquire a more pleasing aspect? Of course it could. That is why, right after Caiaphas spat out the words “it is for our benefit,” he added, “for Him do die for the people, so that the whole nation should not perish.” (John 11:49, 50)

This kind of patriotism is always available to oppressors, just as it was convenient for Caiaphas to defend the high interests of religion. When the silversmiths of Ephesus realized that St. Paul’s preaching was threatening their gains, a certain Demetrius gathered them together and pointed out that Paul’s preaching endangered not only their craft, but also the temple and magnificence of the great goddess Diana, who was worshiped all over Asia and the world. (Acts 19:24-27)

Yet God fulfills His plans using even people’s sins to serve His purpose. The high priest’s selfish remarks were, without his intention, a prophecy that Jesus was to die for the nation of Israel and for His worldwide Church.

God inspires even the words of such a high priest. Prophecies could be heard from his mouth. Heir of fifteen centuries of wonder and hope, of mystery and glory, he was invested with sacerdotal power that gave his words deep significance, though he himself was a scoundrel. That day the council decided to kill Jesus, without deciding exactly when or how.

Second Conference

Jesus knew of the decision of the Sanhedrin. His answer was, in effect, “Go ahead, kill Me. I shall come back to life, three days after you crucify Me.”

In the face of such claims, Caiaphas could very well realize that there is no talking to such a man. He was a dangerous lunatic. Things were beginning to unravel.

Earlier, Jesus had said to His disciples, “You know that after two days is the feast of the Passover, and the Son of Man is betrayed to be crucified.” Then [and only then] the chief priests assembled together, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, to “the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and consulted that they might take Jesus by subtlety, and kill Him. But they said, Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar among the people.” (Matt. 26:2-4)

The word “then” has great significance in this place in the Bible. *Then*, when Jesus decides, then the plotters gather to do their evil thing. In this sense Jesus was not a victim but the main director. His death was necessary for the expiation of the sins of the world. He ordained it Himself, thoroughly, allowing human wickedness to accomplish God’s purposes and to fulfill the prophecies.

We see this in Matthew 26:2-4. The priests decided: We shall kill Him, but not during the feast. Jesus decided: The Passover is in two days. Then I shall be crucified, because I am the true Passover Lamb. Jesus was sacrificed when He ordained, not when the killers planned.

Jesus had to drain the bitter cup. During the night of the betrayal, He was forsaken by all His disciples. Peter said in vain, “We shall not forsake You.” Jesus said to Peter, “You will deny Me three times.” Things happened just as Jesus said, not as Peter promised.

The first Christians understood this. They knew Jesus planned His own crucifixion with love. That is why they say, in one of their prayers to God, “For of a truth against Your holy child Jesus, whom You have anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, to do whatsoever Your hand and Your counsel determined before to be done.” (Acts 4:27, 28)

Passover Preparations of God’s Priests

Thus, two days before Passover, the priests and rulers gathered in the courtyard of the high priest Caiaphas to discuss ways to entrap Jesus and kill Him.

In preparation for Passover, there was great bustling in the narrow streets of Jerusalem. Jews from all over the world were filling the city. There was cooking and cleaning in houses. People prepared unleavened bread and arranged for the sacrificial lambs. There was anticipation on everyone’s face as they looked forward to celebrating their deliverance from Egyptian bondage. Only for Jesus was it difficult to look forward to the solemn occasion. The Friday of Passover was the date fixed by Himself when He would suffer the lingering pain of crucifixion.

The Man of Sorrows contrasted with those celebrating with joy. Let us be cautious about our joy! Let us always be cautious and careful about joy, because your source of joy might be the cause of great fear or sorrow for another. Even in our times of

rejoicing, we should not grieve the person who is unable to share our joy or forget his own sorrow.

Every Jew knew the significance of Passover. He knew the law where it was written, “Observe the month of Aviv, and keep the Passover to the Lord your God: for in the month of Aviv the Lord your God brought you forth out of Egypt by night. You shall therefore sacrifice the Passover to the Lord your God, of the flock and the herd, in the place which the Lord shall choose to place His name there. You shall eat no leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread therewith, even the bread of affliction, for you came forth out of the land of Egypt in haste: that you may remember the day when you came forth out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life.” (Deut. 16:1-3)

Passover should be celebrated to honor the Lord. Ironically, the Lord’s priests gathered before Passover to plot to kill the Lord.

One might excuse them on the basis that the Lord delivered them from Egypt at night, when they could not see Him; therefore, they did not recognize Him when He came disguised as a carpenter. They can be excused for not recognizing Him easily. Their great guilt was that they did not try Him, when they heard that He called Himself Messiah. Their guilt was that they doomed Him to death without even searching to find out if indeed He was the Savior.

The day before the feast of Passover there was no leaven to be found in the whole land. But people’s hearts were full of the leaven of wickedness. That is why St. Paul later wrote, “Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” (I Cor. 5:8)

Henceforth people had to learn what Jesus taught, “that whatever thing from without enters into the man, it cannot defile him [not even leavened bread during Passover]; because it enters not into his heart, but into the belly, and goes out into the draught, purging all meats.” Then He added, ‘That which comes out of the man, that defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man.’” (Mark 7:18-22)

God had commanded the Jews from the whole world to gather in Jerusalem for Passover. Yet they allowed the priests and rulers to inspire them to celebrate the feast to honor the Lord by crying, “Crucify Him! Crucify Jesus!”

God gave His law on Sinai fifty days after Passover and the Exodus, but down through the centuries sinful people have abused and misused and ignored it. Yet it is a codification of the Christian teaching that “God is love.” (I John 4:8) God is *not* love, many insist. Look at all the horrible tragedies and misfortunes that you see on earth. But one must distinguish between God’s good intentions and man’s sinful nature. They are poles apart. God’s intentions are always full of love. Life on earth does not reflect this because God’s loving intentions are so often thwarted by human sinfulness, which deviates from God’s good order. Thus, God gave the Passover feast to His people out of love, but they used it to carry out the greatest crime of the ages.

Two days before Passover the priests and scribes gathered in Caiaphas' courtyard to plan the killing of a Man who at that moment was sitting quietly at table in Bethany. All their wickedness could not trouble Jesus’ peace. Mark in chapter 14 begins by telling about that council of chief priests and scribes and their plot to kill Jesus. The same chapter refers five times to the fact of Jesus eating. To eat under such circumstances is a sign of perfect inner peace. The priests could not take that from Him.

The Trial of Jesus

When Jesus was betrayed and arrested, the soldiers bound Him. But what kept Him bound was not the rope around His hands but His desire to sacrifice Himself for our sins by His sufferings. Otherwise He who had worked so many wonders could easily have broken those bonds.

The Savior was first taken to Annas, where the chief priests and scribes were gathered. Annas questioned Him about His disciples and His teachings. Jesus avoided the question about the disciples and answered only the question about His teaching. He wanted to protect His disciples and was careful not to reveal their names to the executioners. As for His teachings, they contained no secrets. “I spoke openly to the world,” Jesus said. “I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort, and in secret have I said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who heard Me what I have said to them. Behold, they know what I said.” (John 18:20, 21)

Hearing these words, one of the officers standing nearby slapped Jesus and said, “Do You answer the high priest so?” Of course, the officer knew better than anyone else that the high priest was just a poor sinner like the rest of us. Ask any bailiff for his opinion of the court at whose door he stands watch, and you will hear the unvarnished truth. But the title blinds people. Annas was a sinner, but he bore the title of high priest. So the bailiff felt it was his duty to guard the honor of his position and demand respect.

It should be noted that the bailiff slapped the accused during the trial, and Annas did not rebuke him.

Jesus answered simply, “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why do you smite Me?” (John 18:23) Namely, “You heard Me, too. If I spoke evil, be a witness of the accusation. But if I spoke well, why do you beat Me?”

Jesus did not receive an answer to that question. In fact, Annas only wanted to satisfy his curiosity by ordering Jesus to be brought to him first. The formal trial was to take place before Caiaphas, in whose house the Sanhedrin was gathered, happy that their arrangement with Judas had been successful and that Jesus was in their hands.

According to the traditional customs of the Sanhedrin the setting of the trial would have been as follows: The judges before whom Jesus was brought would sit on cushions, Middle Eastern fashion, with their legs crossed under them, barefoot, in a half circle. All of them would have been wearing turbans on their heads. The accused stood before them.

It was written in Psalm 41:11: “By this I know that you favor me, because my enemy does not triumph over me.” But Jesus, the Father’s Beloved, remained bound before His enemies. The scenario was necessary for our salvation.

Like many other Jewish religious customs of the day, the laws and regulations regarding the investigation of an accused person seemed appropriate and fair. The accused must be considered innocent until sentence was pronounced. The law said that the Sanhedrin existed to save lives, not to destroy them. When the accused was brought before the council, it was the chairman’s duty from the beginning to point out to the witnesses that human life is very precious; therefore, they should not omit anything favorable to the accused.

The lawyer was called Baal-Rev (namely, lawyer), and he had to do his best to absolve the accused. He had complete freedom to bring evidence to help the guilty one, and no member of the court of law who had once spoken for absolution could change his mind and vote for condemnation. The sentence of absolution could be pronounced immediately, that of condemnation only after a one-day deliberation. The investigation of an accused could not take place during the night. The judges who pronounced a death sentence had to fast one day before! It is written in the Talmud, “A Sanhedrin that executes one man in seven years is called destructive.” A rabbi added his opinion: “Even if they execute a man in 70 years.”

These regulations were very beautiful indeed, but they were not taken into account when Jesus was tried. His trial was a mockery. However, we should not believe the judges were unfair only to Him. The Jewish historian Josephus Flavius writes, broadly speaking, that fictitious courts of law were set up in those days that condemned to death anyone opposed to their own interests, though they had no authority for such condemnations.

In order to be able to condemn Jesus to death, the council searched for some lies as evidence against Him. (Matt. 26:59) Once they had made up their mind to kill Him, they themselves certainly did not need the lying testimonies of the witnesses they engaged. But those testimonies were needed to convince the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to permit Jesus’ execution.

Things did not go well. Many witnesses presented false testimony against Him, but their testimonies did not match. Finally two came forward and quoted Jesus as saying, “I am able to destroy this temple made with hands, and to build another one in three days, not made with hands.” (Matt. 26:61; Mark 14:58. See also John 2:19 for Jesus’ original statement.)

It was false testimony, but their lie served to make the truth of God shine more to His glory. (Rom. 3:7) The fact that they put in Jesus’ mouth such words of authority must have resounded wonderfully throughout the council hall. These words indeed expressed Jesus’ power and personality in the fact that those witnesses, who in order to be believed had to mix truth with error, chose the truth of His claim to authority. He is the very image of God, who is all-powerful. A second great truth shining from the lie of those witnesses

was that God does not dwell in man-made temples, not even in the temple of Jerusalem, but is the Lord of heaven and earth.

However, that particular accusation placed an especially heavy burden on Him before that court. Not too many years before, Hyrcanus, envoy of the king of Syria, had threatened that if Judas Maccabeus were not delivered to him, he would destroy the temple of Jerusalem.

Now the false witnesses accused Jesus, the Jew who claimed to be the Messiah, of threatening an action similar to that mentioned by a pagan enemy of God.

Jesus kept silent! What He had to say was too holy to be cast before swine. Jesus kept silent because He wanted to die. He could have escaped by defending Himself. The silence of Jesus the innocent about an unjust accusation was part of His atonement for the sins of the world. Jesus bore the unjust accusation patiently. Tertullian, one of the great teachers of the early Church, well said, “The judges, looking at His patience, should have recognized who was Christ.”

The high priest then asked, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” (It was part of Jewish superstition to avoid pronouncing the word God.) Jesus, thus challenged, answered him reluctantly: “You have said so. Moreover, I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God’s power, coming on the clouds of heaven.”

The One who, during His earthly life, did not know where to rest His head, promised He would be seen coming again on the clouds of heaven.

“You shall see”—that word was a threat. Indeed, for two thousand years the Jewish people have been the unintentional witness of the triumph of Christ’s army. “You shall see”—you yourselves shall see, although centuries must pass before the dead are resurrected and all men attend Christ’s victory, some to inherit eternal life, others eternal punishment and shame. “You shall see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Caiaphas must have laughed inwardly. Can a mere man come on the clouds of heaven? Today we know that a man can come on the clouds of heaven. This is an accomplished fact. But a far greater event remains to take place. Jesus, the One who is now sitting at the right hand of God’s power, will come on the clouds of heaven in glory.

Observing Jesus' patient bearing and hearing His words, full of strength, the council should have knelt down before Him, should have unbound His hands and announced to the whole nation that Messiah had come indeed. Instead, Caiaphas the high priest tore his robe and cried, "Blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy."

Jesus did not blaspheme, however. But the high priest thought he did well to tear his robe, an act strictly forbidden to the priests. (Lev. 10:6) How strange were the words, "Why do we need any more witnesses to accuse Jesus of blasphemy?"

Human rationalization appeals to this trick. No matter how hostile Caiaphas was, his conscience nevertheless rebuked him for condemning Jesus on the ground of some false testimonies he had concocted. However, now he is satisfied. In fact, his conscience is satisfied with very little. He does not base his sentence on these testimonies but upon Jesus' own words. It had nothing to do with the fact that Jesus' words were provoked by those testimonies. Thus people cheat themselves and pretend to be clean in their own eyes.

Wasn't the Spanish Inquisition basically the same? The priests were not allowed to shed blood, but that did not stop them from torturing the accused. However, the tortures were of such a nature that they would not cause bloodshed. When one was found guilty, the inquisitors delivered him into the hands of the civil authorities, piously asking them to be merciful. That was a request full of hypocrisy, because the pope threatened to curse the authorities if they did not comply.

There were other tricks about torture. The regulations of the Inquisition forbade an accused to be tortured more than once. The inquisitors respected that rule. They never repeated the torture. If it brought no results the first day, they announced they would "continue" that first torture the next day, not that they would start it again.

How useful is conscience to assuage guilt. The high priest was satisfied now. Jesus would be condemned by His own declaration. That was why he addressed the question to the other judges, "You have heard His blasphemy. What do you think of it?" What were some "holy" men supposed to think? Assuming that Caiaphas was right and Jesus was a blasphemer, they should have loved the sinner and turned Him to the right way. At that point every member of the Sanhedrin should have given his opinion.

According to the law, the high priest who presided should have been the last one to present his opinion. But this time he was anxious to be the first. What were the others supposed to say? With one voice they concurred in the sentence: “He is guilty, and should be punished by death.”

Since Jesus took our guilt, there was a bit of truth in the sinner’s mouth. But the sentence was issued by evil hearts.

Someone covered His face, according to the Eastern custom with respect to those condemned. (See Esther 7:8) But they accompany the gesture with mockery, thus fulfilling Micah’s prophecy: “They shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek.” (Mic. 5:1) They spat upon Him, struck Him, and even challenged Him, saying, “Prophecy to us, Christ. Tell us who struck You!”

First they blinded Him. Sinners do this today. First they made sure the Son of God could not see, then they struck. Those priests had a Prophet among them, and so they asked Him, “Who slapped You?” Since He did not answer such questions, their boldness increased and they concluded, “This man is certainly not a prophet.”

The Awakening

Although Jesus’ trial was ruthlessly performed, we would not dare to say that the death sentence was easily handed out.

Such a condemnation is never easily pronounced. It is terrible to sentence any human being to death. But it is more terrible to realize you have condemned an innocent person, in a way that cannot be repaired. It is more terrible to know you will have to give account of your decision because the One you have killed was the Messiah sent by God. Events following the crucifixion formed that conviction in the mind of Caiaphas.

He had turned over the rest of the affair to the other priests. They intended to gather a mob to force Pontius Pilate, by their clamor for crucifixion, to give official sanction for their decision. Then they were to remain near the cross to confirm that everything was over.

Caiaphas minded his business. Suddenly Jerusalem was seized by great darkness at noon, completely incomprehensible since this was the time of the new moon when there could not be an eclipse of the sun. It was even at the hour when Jesus was crucified on the cross, as Caiaphas knew.

“What can it mean?” the high priest must have wondered. “I remember from the scriptures that great darkness engulfed Egypt in the olden days. It was one of the plagues God sent to that land because they had oppressed innocent people. But we have sentenced a guilty man. Why this darkness?”

A prophecy of Amos might have come to mind: “And it shall come to pass in that day, says the Lord God, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day.” (Amos 8:9) But Caiaphas removed that question from his mind immediately. “I shall have to talk to the star readers. They know how to explain such strange events.”

Groping in the dark, he went to the temple. It was a holy day. It was customary for people to gather in the morning. The priests delivered sermons continuously. The high priest was to conduct his service in the afternoon. Because of the darkness there was commotion, disorder, and panic in the temple. “Superstitious people,” the high priest thought. With a group of priests he entered the holy place, which was lighted by a seven-branched candlestick, to say the prayers.

The Curtain Is Torn

When the great liturgy was in progress, suddenly the curtain that separated the holy from the most holy place was torn from top to bottom before the amazed eyes of Caiaphas and the others.

The hanging of that curtain had been ordained by God Himself in connection with the ancient sanctuary service. God said to Moses, “And you shall make a veil of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen of cunning work; with cherubim it shall be made. And you shall hang it on four pillars of shittim wood overlaid with gold; their hooks shall be of gold, upon the four sockets of silver.” (Ex. 26:31)

The veil must have been extremely beautiful in the beginning, but now it was smeared with blood, since the priests sprinkled the blood of the animals sacrificed in the temple.

Those sacrifices were ordained by God. Man has the duty to live a life of purity. It was only in particularly special cases, when a man committed certain sins, that he had to bring a sacrifice of expiation. But the sacrifice had become an easy way to avoid the duties of a pure life. Instead of living like true people of God, making an occasional

sacrifice for sin as prescribed, they were living in lawlessness, while “appeasing” God with sacrifices that kept the veil smeared with blood.

They deluded themselves just like many Christians today who do not understand the words of St. John: “My little children, these things I write to you that you sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” (I John 2:1) This is the life program of a Christian, which he needs to respect strictly. The Christian must walk in straight paths, like a ship that follows its regular route on the sea. However, just as the ship has lifeboats, which are not for regular use but only for emergencies, so the Christian has this assurance, as recorded by John: “And if any man sin”—a real misfortune for a Christian—“we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

Of course, this does not mean that, for the joy of having an expiatory sacrifice, we can live a life contrary to God’s will. Many Jews had this misunderstanding and so the curtain was smeared with much blood.

The veil was torn from top to bottom at the very hour Jesus died on the cross. In the East, tearing the clothes was an ordinary custom. The Chaldean root *prk* means “to tear,” “to split,” “to slash.” It is in this sense that we find the Hebrew word in Psalm 7:2; I Kings 19:11; Zechariah 11:16; and Exodus 26:31. Therefore the word *parohet* used to express this meant “the one ordered to be torn,” “the one which will get split,” or “the one which is going to be slashed.”

This prophecy contained in the name of the curtain was now fulfilled. For Caiaphas the tearing of the veil must have been a great blow, as if the web of lies the devil had woven in his mind was also torn. He experienced a rare hour of awakening when he suddenly realized he had sinned.

One can only conjecture about this experiences during the holy Passover weekend, which might have followed this scenario: Caiaphas scarcely recognized himself. “What is happening to me today? Am I a child? Shall I conclude that Jesus, who must have already passed away on the cross, was innocent because a curtain was torn?

“It must have been worn out because of so much coagulated blood on it. It is good that only the priests saw it. The most holy place was where the Ark of the Covenant was placed, but centuries ago this Ark was lost. The two cherubim that overshadowed the

mercy seat where God once made His appearance were no longer there. How long has it been since God made His appearance? The whole ritual of the temple was just a farce, hidden by a veil that has finally been torn.” The most holy was empty, as empty as the hearts of all those who had put the Son of God to death.

Caiaphas’ thoughts went immediately to what he could do to cover up the strange event: repair the curtain and continue the fraud. It was good that only the priests had seen it torn. But this was a sign that the entrance to the most holy, to God Himself, was free to any man who sincerely repented of his sins.

Other Signs

Caiaphas had barely composed himself and the priests had barely resumed the interrupted service when suddenly the earth began to shake. The walls around them cracked. The pillars cracked, as if they were of cardboard. A deafening noise was heard of collapsing houses. People ran from the temple, seized by panic. Women and children cried.

The earth quaked. At that time many believed that the earth quaked when some great personage died or when outrageous injustice was committed.

After the darkness and the tearing of the veil, the earthquake aroused the voice of Caiaphas' conscience. That voice now cried loudly to him: “You have condemned innocent blood. He was Messiah, the Holy One.” To withstand the pain of soul that threatened to overwhelm him, the high priest tried to recall his most serious reasons for condemning Jesus. But the mind ignored the tortured soul and instead brought to remembrance Isaiah’s messianic prophecy: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” (Isa. 53:3-5)

Why hadn't he thought of that prophecy about Messiah when the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus? Isaiah clearly predicted that Messiah would come humbly, would not be received by His own people, and would be pierced for their sins.

Caiaphas ran quickly to Golgotha; He had to see. Maybe Jesus had been taken down from the cross alive and the trial could be re-opened. He ran quickly, quickly, then slower, slower, till finally he stopped. "Have you gone mad, Joseph?" he asked himself. "Come to your senses. You are an old man with a high rank. You're making a fool of yourself. All this trouble for an earthquake! There have been many before. Was it only you who tried Him, after all? There were many other judges. Were they all wrong?"

Calmer, Caiaphas straightened his clothes and turned back to his house. Today was a crazy day. In his room, reclining on a bed, he was alone with his conscience. There were so many things to occupy a poor man's head in one day. He had to compose himself. But a voice kept insisting that he had shed innocent blood, that Jesus was the Messiah. He thought of another prophecy, this time from Zechariah: "They [the Jews] shall look on Me whom they have pierced." (Zech. 12:10) That brought to mind a psalm, in which David said, speaking prophetically, "For dogs have compassed Me: the assembly of the wicked have enclosed Me; they pierced My hands and My feet." (Ps. 22:16)

Caiaphas was seized with despair. He had committed a terrible crime; he was sure of that. But what should he do? Hang himself, like Judas? At that moment Jesus seemed to appear before his eyes, saying, "Joseph, you did not know what you were doing. I shall not refuse anyone who comes to Me. Come to Me, poor high priest, burdened with toil, and I shall give you rest."

Caiaphas shook off the thought. "You, the One hanged on the cursed tree, You would give me rest?" His whole being, his pride as high priest, revolted. But Jesus, whom he continued to see before his mind's eye, went on, "I am the good Shepherd. I did not come to judge but to save what was lost. What if you have sinned? Don't you know I am the door for sinners?" No! Again his pride resisted. He would not let his glory as high priest be smeared. Should he admit a whole life of error and sin? No! Never!

Caiaphas refused salvation. And because he refused it, he lied to himself: Jesus was not the Messiah.

Jesus' Resurrection

On the next day, which was Sabbath, Caiaphas started to carry out his functions. He did not have one moment of rest. He was disturbed by the news brought by people from the countryside that the darkness of Friday noon was widespread. In the evening, troubled and exhausted, he went to bed but could not sleep much. He was in torment.

Early in the morning, before dawn, there was another strong earthquake, another sign from God. Why should he stay in bed any longer? He got dressed and went outside. He took a deep breath of the sweet spring air. How beautiful was the Easter dawn! Caiaphas' thoughts rose to his Maker in gratitude: "Lord, even if Jesus were the Messiah, isn't it possible to live without Him?" A voice inside him answered, "You may love God, but your sin lies between you and your Maker. It is only Jesus' sacrifice that can atone for it."

It was lovely outside. Flowers were spreading their delicate perfume around. That morning Caiaphas' heart was ready for all good things. He would even be ready to believe in Jesus, he thought. "Couldn't this faith remain a secret known only by God and me?"

The same voice answered, "No! Those who want to follow the path of truth should bear the cross of sufferings, naked, poor, and oppressed. Light cannot remain hidden." Startled, Caiaphas took a step back. "The old foolishness again! What strange thoughts can come to a man. Should I, the high priest, believe in a carpenter hanged on a tree, who has started to rot in His tomb by now? I believe in one God. I would be crazy to think otherwise."

Suddenly he saw the soldiers of the temple running toward him—those who had been ordered to watch Jesus' tomb. Breathless, they approached him with the words with which Christians greet each other on Easter Sunday, "Jesus is risen!" Caiaphas was stunned. He could scarcely believe his ears! "Truly, He has been resurrected?"

"Yes, He has. We saw it with our own eyes!"

Caiaphas was the first man in Jerusalem to hear that piece of news, as it reached the ears of Jesus' enemies before the disciples in the city found it out. The soldiers gave him a full account. They told him how Jesus came back to life after an angel rolled back the stone, and how He appeared before some women who had come to the tomb, and how

He told them that He was going before His disciples to Galilee. Therefore, Caiaphas could send spies after the disciples who, of course, would go and thus certify whether or not Jesus was indeed alive.

But no! Even if he had no doubt about the facts as the soldiers recounted them, Caiaphas would not believe. To admit that Jesus was the Messiah and that He had been brought back to life from the dead—why, that would mean being stoned to death by the people, who would rise up against the injustice committed against Jesus. Better not admit anything.

Hurriedly, he called together the other chief priests and elders, who had undergone similar torment, but none of them wanted to confess to such weakness before the others. Caiaphas decided they should give a lot of money to these soldiers, bribing them to spread the lie that Jesus' body had been stolen by His disciples from the grave while they were sleeping.

Judas had been given very little money; he had not asked much. But now it was a matter of grave importance. A resurrection cost more. Caiaphas did not lose time bargaining. He gave much money for the spreading of a lie. Are we any different today? People in the world spend more money for the spreading of lies than Christians spend on spreading the truth of the gospel.

Of course, the lie was absurd. If a theft occurred while the soldiers were asleep, how could they tell that the thieves were the disciples? And if the Sanhedrin took for granted the statement that the disciples had stolen the body, how is it they did not accuse the disciples of profaning the tomb?

But people are easy to deceive. Even the soldiers did not accept the truth, though fully convinced that Jesus had been resurrected. It is not proof that is needed, but rather the spirit in which truth is received. For the soldiers, money was more important. How easily they sold their souls! How then could the truth reach the people?

As far as Caiaphas was concerned, he had every opportunity to be saved, but he neither entered the kingdom of heaven, nor did he let others enter either. Sufficient is the lie.

A Good Piece of News

One can hardly imagine a clearer case of deliberate sin and turning from the light than that of Caiaphas and his fellow priests.

But strangely, not many weeks later, Peter said something almost inconceivable in his Pentecost speech delivered in Jerusalem. After telling the Jews they had killed Jesus, the Author of life, he added these startling words: “And now, brethren, I know that through ignorance you did it, as did also your rulers.” (Acts 3:17)

So God kept the door of salvation open even yet for Caiaphas. God, to whom no one gives orders, wants to consider Caiaphas' sin a sin of ignorance. If this is how God looked upon the high priest's terrible sin, how could the devil ever bring me, a believer, to despair by accusing me of committing a sin deliberately, after I received the knowledge of truth, for which no sacrifice remains? (Heb. 10:26) I shall simply repent of my sin, no matter how serious it was or when it was committed. God is the Ruler, and He is free to consider my sin, too, a sin of ignorance.

God's patience with Caiaphas was unlimited. But he steeled his heart and did not repent. After he crucified Jesus and spread the lie among the people, he continued to oppress the apostles, even to the stoning of Stephen. That was the climax of his sins. He himself was killed not long after.

The Herodian Kings

There were four different persons by the same name of Herod: Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, Herod Agrippa 1, and Herod Agrippa II. All four were enemies of Jesus and of His apostles. We shall deal with each of them in turn.

1. Herod the Great

Herod the Great was a man who was born to rule. His body was strong. He was a good rider, a skillful hunter. His arrow never missed the target. By the age of 25 he had won great fame in the war against the marauding gangs of Galilee. As an old man of sixty, he still personally headed the war against the Arabs. Most of the time he had been successful in war.

He had a wild, passionate, merciless character. He was not bothered by rivers of blood. He killed his relations, he killed his wife. On the other hand, he was flexible regarding his subjects and had the art of making himself likable. He was a steadfast friend to the Romans.

But he did all this to fulfill his greatest ambition: to have power and glory.

When it seemed to him that the high priest Aristobulos (??), who was of the Hasmonean family, might possibly replace him, he killed him while he was taking a bath. After he was sued, Caesar Antonius absolved him.

When he came back from the trial, he killed his brother-in-law Joseph, suspected of having sinned with his wife Mariamne, and when his protector Antonius was defeated by Augustus, Herod rushed to kill 80-year-old Hyrcanus, who he feared could be a candidate for the throne. After that he killed his wife, together with a certain Soemus, thinking they might have had a relationship. But that murder, unlike the others, his conscience could not easily bear.

He was to burn with a passionate longing for his beloved wife, killed in a moment of fury, for his whole life. To soothe his sorrow, he looked to wild entertainment, drinking, and hunting. This life of debauchery ended in illness, perhaps madness. Thinking that his mother-in-law was watching for the moment for his death with joy and plotted against him, he killed her too.

The fact that he was such a killer did not keep Herod, nevertheless, from being very religious as well. He was responsible for rebuilding the great temple of Jerusalem, graced with the presence of Jesus Himself. In the provinces, Herod built temples to the Caesars, where some gods were worshiped, but in Jerusalem he built an extraordinary temple to Jehovah. The splendor of that temple was well-known. People of that time commented, "He who hasn't seen Herod's building has never seen something beautiful."

But Herod did not spend time praying in that temple. He spent his time at the theater, watching bullfights and cheering gladiators.

God Wants to Save Herod

A man such as Herod the Great could also be saved.

It seems to be deliberately written in the Gospel account. "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abijah: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." (Luke 1:5) Herod had only to call that righteous priest to his palace, and he could have learned from him the way of salvation. But he did not seek him out.

Yet God, in His great mercy, gave Herod another opportunity to save his soul.

Meeting the Magi

The wise men from the East, called according to tradition Melchior, Balthasar and Gaspar, came one day to Jerusalem. “Where is the new-born King of the Jews?” they asked. They were not questioning whether a king of the Jews had recently been born. They only asked where He could be found.

They asked for the One born King of the Jews, different from Herod, who was made, not born a king; one who held no right to the throne belonging to a son of the house of David.

At the time of the wise men’s visit, there was a general expectation of a great savior to appear in the world. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote, “There is a belief in many people’s minds that there are predictions, in some ancient writings of the priests, that some persons who have come from Judah will rule the world.”

The Old Testament had already been translated into Greek. Biblical prophecies were known to many people. In the New Testament we see an Ethiopian eunuch searching the prophecies. Zoroaster, a Jew who had become the founder of a new religion in Persia, also predicted the coming of Messiah. The two hundred years of Persian domination of Judea and the tie between the Jews in the East to their brothers of Palestine must have aroused a deep interest in the Jewish religion and its prophecies about the Savior. It was also known that His birth would be related to a heavenly phenomenon.

Now, the Magi, seeing a new star in the sky, related it to messianic predictions. (In the Chinese astronomical tables such a star is confirmed as having appeared during the period of Jesus’ birth. Kepler calculated that such an uncommon heavenly apparition occurred three times during the year of Jesus’ birth in the Fish constellation, which the stargazers of those times assumed was related to the fate of Judea.) God spoke to the Persian magi in the language of stargazers. Actually, an angel of God guided them to Jerusalem.

Here they asked, “Where is the new-born King of the Jews? We have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

Jesus, this new-born King of the Jews, could save the great sinner, Herod. One would have expected Herod to be glad to hear the news of His birth.

But Herod was greatly troubled with a baseless fear of Jesus—whose kingdom was not of this world—who he thought might take his throne. This time Herod’s suspicious nature was to ruin him.

Receiving badly the good news of Jesus’ birth, he plotted to kill Him.

Jesus came to earth not to lose but to save people’s souls. Indeed, God did not send His Son into the world to judge people, but to save them. Jesus called everyone with gentle words: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matt. 11:28)

But Herod suspected bad intentions on the part of the holy Infant born in a humble manger and decided to kill Him.

The Misconstruers of Scripture

Herod, who knew very well that all things were predicted by the Holy Scriptures, gathered together all the chief priests and scholars of the people and asked them where the Christ was to be born.

In this Herod sinned. Knowing that the Scriptures were holy and that they contained prophecies, Herod should not have had to ask others about their contents. Many people are liars and misuse Scripture according to their unregenerate minds. He himself should have searched and found out the answer about Messiah’s birthplace. Moreover, he would have realized that Messiah was not coming to build an earthly kingdom now and that he had nothing to fear for his throne. On the contrary, he could rely upon the Savior for forgiveness of his sins and for a place in the kingdom of heaven.

But then, as now, few were willing to search the Scriptures for themselves to learn the truth.

The priests and scribes gave Herod a convincing answer about the town where he should send soldiers to carry out his scheme. But the answer was unclear as to the reason for the Messiah’s coming to earth.

“In Bethlehem of Judea,” they answered him, “Christ would be born; because this is what Micah the prophet wrote.” The direct reading is, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” (Mic. 5:2)

Convinced that the Christ had to be born in Bethlehem, Herod felt free to go ahead with his plans to commit murder.

But the priests interpreted the text from the book of Micah the prophet, according to their own mentality.

If Herod had read the book himself and meditated on it, he would have discovered that Bethlehem was chosen by God as Messiah's birthplace just because it was an insignificant city, to show that the Savior would not come to seek the glory and splendor of this world. He would have learned that His humble birth signified a life of humility. He would also have found out that this Child was eternal, like His heavenly Father, a member of the Godhead, and that it would be useless to struggle against Him. Not only useless, but also meaningless, because it would be foolish to struggle against a mission of love and good will originating with the Father.

But Herod did not search the Scriptures himself. He consulted the priests. It is instructive to compare the text above with the way they quoted it to Herod. "And they said to him, In Bethlehem of Judea; for thus it is written by the prophet, And you Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of you shall come a Governor, that shall rule My people Israel." (Matt. 2:5, 6)

The high priests and scholars made it appear that Messiah would be important and influential in a worldly way! Herod himself imagined that Messiah would necessarily come in brightness, to set up a kingdom on earth immediately. That is why He could be born in an insignificant place.

Instead of reading "though you are little among the thousands of Judah," the priests said, "you. . .are not the least among the princes of Judah," giving the original text their own twist.

About the origin of His "goings forth from eternity" they said not one word.

Herod wanted to find out the truth from the priests. Instead, he found out just enough to add a new sin to his prior sins. From them he learned nothing that would turn his thoughts to salvation and away from his evil tendencies.

Since he had the murder of the whole house of the Hasmoneans on his conscience and of many rabbis, another killing was nothing unusual. He conceived a devilish plot.

The Gospel tells that he called the Magi in secret. They had come to look for the new-born King of the Jews, but instead of Him they faced a scheming monarch. What a cruel disappointment!

Herod, who by now cherished the thought of murdering the Infant, hid that plan under religious words full of piety. He sent the Magi to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the Infant! And when you find Him, let me know, so that I too may come and worship Him.”

In this world it is often thus, that the foulest plans are concealed by religious phrases. Once in Philippi, when St. Paul spoiled the business of some peddlers of spiritual quackery by banishing a spirit from a fortuneteller, her masters gave Paul and Silas into the hands of the magistrates, saying, “These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city, and they teach customs which are not lawful for us being Romans to receive or observe.” (Acts 16:20, 21)

Judas Iscariot, the thief, became angry when a very expensive ointment was poured on Jesus’ head. Pretending to defend the poor, he was reproachful, suggesting that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Certainly his thought was not for the poor but for his own enrichment.

So Herod had in his heart the thought of killing the Infant, but on his lips the intention of going to worship Him.

The wise men from the East listened to Herod, as courtesy obliged them to do, but they did not obey him because their faithfulness to God prevented them from doing so. They left without refusing Herod’s request, but also without making any promise. They went to Bethlehem alone. There was not one single Jew in the whole of Jerusalem, not even one single priest who, upon hearing the news about Messiah’s birth, was at least curious enough to go with them.

The Magi found the Infant in Bethlehem. But in a dream they were warned by God not to go back to Herod, so they returned to their land by another way.

From them Herod had heard the good news of the Savior’s birth, but he too did not receive it.

The Slaughter of the Innocents

When he saw “he had been cheated by the Magi,” he became very angry. How his heart must have revolted against those cheating Magi. But he, the killer, would not admit to being tricked. He sent soldiers to slay all the male infants under two years of age in Bethlehem and its environs, in line with the information given by the priests.

A horrible scene of carnage sprang from Herod’s baseless fear that the new-born Infant of Bethlehem wanted to take his throne. The irony was that he who protected his throne with bloodstained hands was to die that very year.

Herod could not kill Jesus. His parents, forewarned by an angel, had escaped with Him to Egypt for some time. But God’s punishment was to reach Herod. Two of his sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, had also been killed because of his suspicion that they were plotting against him. He who left so many mothers in Bethlehem childless ordered the killing of his own sons.

Five days after the execution of his son Antipater by his own order, Herod died. Trying to get settled at the baths on the shore of the Dead Sea, and feeling that his end was coming, he came to die in Jeridea. (??)

2. Herod Antipas

Herod Antipas inherited a vain way of living from his father, but in spite of his bad heredity, he seemed to have a better nature. We learn this from Matthew’s Gospel, where it is written that Joseph, knowing that cruel Archelaus succeeded his father as king in Judea, chose to settle in Galilee under the reign of Herod Antipas, who promised to be a better king. However, he was the Herod later responsible for beheading John the Baptist.

Herod Antipas had no thought of abandoning his father’s sins, in spite of the warnings of the Hebrew Scriptures. As a prince, he was cruel, shrewd, lustful, unfaithful, superstitious. These qualities he retained as king. Jesus, who was not impressed by high rank or pompous title, called him “that fox.”

There was a very serious sin in his life. His position obliged him to make ceremonial visits to Rome. In that city, he always stayed with his brother, Herod Philip. At a certain moment he rewarded his brother’s hospitality by taking his wife, together with their daughter, and sent his own wife back home to her father.

Neither Herod Antipas nor Herodias, his brother's wife, was young any more, and so they did not have the excuse of youthful passion. Their deed, a wanton act among friends, between brothers was foul.

Yet the Word of God had something to say to him as well: "Now, lo, if he begets a son, who sees all the sins which his father has done, and considers but does not do likewise; who has not eaten on the mountains, nor lifted his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, nor defiled his neighbor's wife; has not oppressed anyone, nor withheld a pledge, nor robbed by violence, but has given his bread to the hungry and covered the naked with clothing; who has withdrawn his hand from the poor and not received usury or increase, but has executed My judgments and walked in My statutes—he shall not die for the iniquity of his father; he shall surely live!" (Ezek. 18:15-17)

God Wants to Save Herod Antipas

But God loves sinners and would certainly give this king the opportunity to be saved.

At that time God raised up a great prophet, John the Baptist, who faithfully rebuked king: "You are not permitted to take your brother's wife." You are not permitted, because you know your father murdered people whom he suspected of having sinned with his wife. There were hopes that Herod Antipas would be saved since, as Mark says in his Gospel, he listened to John with gladness and considered his words seriously. (Mark 6:20)

God then surrounded him with new opportunities for salvation. There was Manaen, a prophet, who as a child had been raised together with Herod the tetrarch. (Acts 13:1) There was Joanna, wife of Herod's steward, who turned to God and became an extraordinarily faithful woman, putting aside any difference of rank and helping Jesus, along with other women, such as Mary Magdalene. There was the centurion from Herod's court who turned to God and was a model of faith at that time. Jesus, after curing his slave, said, "I tell you truly that I have not seen such great faith, not even in Israel."

One can assume that those people spoke to Herod and begged him in the name of God to turn from his evil ways and trust Jesus as his Savior. No one knows his innermost thoughts—but he could not make up his mind.

While he listened to John “gladly,” he also liked his sins. Far from assimilating the warnings and translating them into action, he found over the years a way to soothe his conscience. He deluded himself about his own state. He may have considered himself among the faithful, because God’s servants could come to him at any time, and he listened to them carefully. But he would not give up his habitual sins. His conscience was always rebuked, but he hesitated to calm it by amending his life.

Beheading John the Baptist

A man cannot live with a tormented conscience forever. If he is unwilling to change, there has to be another solution.

The moment of decision came for Herod as well. If he could not make up his mind to leave Herodias, the alternative was to put John the Baptist in prison. If you don’t like the message, dispose of the messenger. Silence the voice, and the problem will disappear.

Herod did not intend to do more harm than that. But when you start down the path of evil, you are no longer your own master. Herod had a great palace in Machaerus, east of the Dead Sea, where John the Baptist was imprisoned. On the occasion of his birthday, he gave a feast, for which Herodias prepared a surprise.

At that time, dancers, both men and women, were a preferred type of entertainment, and their indecent and degrading shows were much applauded. Herodias knew that Herod would enjoy her thoughtfulness. So she arranged for a princess to dance at that feast, a descendant of a priest, a descendant of Maccabean princes—her own daughter Salome.

When that degraded girl danced before the guests, stuffed with food and wine, Herod was charmed and offered her whatever she wanted, even to half his kingdom.

Those were extravagant words of praise before his guests, since Herod, as a Roman subject, could not give anyone even a village in the kingdom that had been entrusted to him. Those were irresponsible words because it was mockery to offer part of your kingdom to a girl simply for a dance.

However, what a reward was offered to a dancing-girl, and what a reward was offered to John, prophet of God! Salome was honored before all the guests by being offered whatever she asked for. The prophet who had consciously fulfilled his duty lay in

prison. Nothing has changed even today. Entertainers are showered with assets and admired by everyone, while the servants of God live in want and are mocked and persecuted.

Salome asked her mother for advice. Herodias, to whom revenge was more precious than anything else, said, “Ask for the head of the John the Baptist.”

The wicked mother had a wicked daughter. She not only obeyed her mother but even enjoyed doing so. The Gospel says that she rushed immediately into the presence of the king and presented him the following request: “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” She was in a hurry. That demand was according to her wish. She wanted to have the head at once.

What would Herod do now?

He would have done well to ponder his choice seriously. In the Judgment he could say, “God, you know I am of a hesitating nature. That is why I have not accepted Your word.” But, alas, Herod was hesitant only about receiving good things, not bad. He did not consider John the Baptist the greatest man ever born of a woman; he did not look upon him as the promised Elijah, the one who announced the Lamb of God, who could have released him from his sins.

He was concerned about what the guests would say if he did not keep his word. He was now the slave of his own rash promise. That was why “he sent a guard immediately, with the order to bring the head of John the Baptist.”

It was Herod’s birthday, and he turned it into a day of death for history’s most important prophet.

People often neglect and forget their oaths to God, but they consider the promises made at a feast, at card games, during debauchery, as “duties of honor.” Herod could not break his word.

How many of us wouldn’t do the same?

God’s Punishment

God’s punishment was not to suffer delay.

Herod’s army was later defeated by the army of his father-in-law, Aretas. The Caesar, furious, banished Herod and Herodias to Lugdumun, a small locality on the present French-Spanish border. Here they suffered an obscure and dishonored death.

As for Salome, once while she was crossing a frozen lake the ice broke and she fell into the water. The sharpness of the ice cut her head. A head for a head!

Even before this, Herod was stricken with another punishment. God hardened his heart. He had nothing to say. He still knew barren remorse, lived a life of fear, was obsessed by the ghost of the slain prophet and suspected that Jesus was John brought back to life. In fact, when he learned about His miraculous powers, he feared Him greatly.

But he never sought to find the ways of God.

As Passover time, he, the builder of so many pagan temples in Galilee, came to Jerusalem to worship in the temple of Jehovah. There for the first time he met Jesus, who was brought before him bound. He had been remanded by Pontius Pilate.

Herod, curious and full of dark thoughts, asked Jesus many questions. But Jesus, who was the very Word, did not answer anything.

Such silence on Jesus' part was awful, as it signified a judgment. It irritated Herod, who considered it a sign of weakness and fear. Regaining his self-assurance, he reached the greatest degradation.

“Herod and his soldiers treated Him spitefully and mocked Him.”

Herod, who had once listened to John the Baptist's preaching with gladness but could not make up his mind, remained at the pillory forever, like one of Jesus' killers. If he had wanted, he could have released Him.

His father tried to kill the Infant Jesus but did not succeed. What Herod the Great did not do, Herod Antipas did. He sent Jesus back to Pontius Pilate, who gave Him up for crucifixion.

The Word of God does not forget to mention his guilt. It is written in the Book of Acts: “For of a truth against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together.” (Acts 4:27)

The second person in the dynasty of Herods had the opportunity to be saved, but he did not know the moment when he was visited.

3. Herod Agrippa I

Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great, was accustomed to luxury and waste from his childhood. Therefore, it is no wonder he lost his whole fortune when he was still young and furthermore accumulated a lot of debts.

Plotting against Tiberius, who wanted to seize the throne of Caesar, he was caught and obliged to stay in prison for a few months, a good school of suffering for a man soon to become king.

It seems that that school served him well indeed. Jewish tradition is full of praise for Herod Agrippa I, saying that once he became king he was very religious. The Talmud says “he did not skip over any commandment of the law.” His life was blameless, and there was no day in which he did not sacrifice. When fulfilling God’s commandment that the Jews should not worship carved images, he ordered that a statue of the Roman emperor be taken out of the synagogue of a town in Phoenicia. He obliged a young man who wanted to become his son-in-law to be circumcised. Religious ceremonies in the temple brought him to tears.

But we have other sources of information about him besides the Jewish writings. From them we learn that, like his grandfather, the religious sentiments of Herod Agrippa I lasted only for the short period of time he spent every year in Judea. The rest of the time, the “religious” Herod had fun at Brytus, participating in the gladiators’ fights, among other things. In one single day he ordered 1,400 criminals to kill each other in such fights. He built statues to his own daughter in Caesarea, a wicked act in the eyes of the Jewish people. Very careful that his coins should not bear any face in Judea, he nevertheless put his face on the coins of cosmopolitan Galilee.

His religious pretensions were only political. This has been the plague of many of the great people of this world.

Because he was superficial in his attitudes, he of necessity had to become an enemy of Jesus, who required true faith above all. By the time of Herod Agrippa I, Jesus had already gone to heaven, so he could not touch Him. But he took sadistic pleasure in tormenting the members of His Church.

He who knew from his own bitter experience what prison was put Peter and James in jail. Descendant of two generations of killers, he shed holy blood by ordering James to be killed by the sword.

Angry that Peter was released from jail by an angel of God, he ordered that the sixteen soldiers who were in charge of the watch be killed, although they were completely innocent of the fact that Peter escaped, since they could certainly not stop an angel.

But the punishment of God reached Herod Agrippa I.

On a set day he dressed himself in his royal garb, sat on his throne, and spoke to the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon. The people cried, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” Suddenly an angel of the Lord struck him down because he had not given glory to God. He died and was eaten by worms. (Acts 12:20-23)

For an angel, the struggle against a man, even a king, was a simple matter. We read in the Old Testament that one angel had the power to kill 185,000 Assyrians in one night.

Herod had not taken into account those heavenly powers when he set himself up to fight against the Church of Jesus. For this he was food for worms.

All those who follow his example today should think of his fate!

4. Herod Agrippa II

He was followed by Herod Agrippa II, a lecher who went so far as to live with his own sister Berenice. He too played the saint. Thus, he obliged his brother-in-law to be circumcised.

His sister Berenice was also religious. She had taken the vow of a Nazarite: that is, out of love to God she engaged herself not to cut her hair or drink wine. But her love for God did not go so far as to give up incest.

Later, Herod Agrippa II was to fight on the side of the Roman oppressors against his own people and celebrate their defeat, together with Titus.

But prior to this, God offered him the possibility of salvation.

On a visit to Caesarea with Berenice to visit the Roman governor Festus, he was told about a prisoner by the name of Paul, who was accused “with respect to a certain Jesus who had died, whom Paul declared to be alive.”

Anxious to hear him talk, Agrippa and Berenice arrived with great pomp the second day. Paul must have looked with pity at their vanity in dressing smartly just to talk to a prisoner. He certainly did not feel like defending himself before them. He was

grateful to have the opportunity to confess the Word of God before that Herod, especially since he knew the sad history of his dynasty.

When he was allowed to speak, he began with these words: “King Agrippa, I consider myself happy to answer for myself today before you.” (Acts 26:2) While he was talking, he must have prayed that his words would fall like seed on good soil so that Herod at least might be saved!

As he continued, he chose his words carefully. Every word fell like a hammer stroke, meant to crush the stony hearts before him. “My life from my early days,” Paul said in his speech, “is known by all the Jews, because I spent it in Jerusalem, among my own nation.” He who was in chains accused by the Jews and close to being condemned called them “his nation” to teach Agrippa to defend his dynastic interests.

Then he went on: “I lived as a Pharisee, according to the strictest sect of our religion.” It was necessary for Agrippa, who was living with Berenice, the harlot of the Nazarite vow, to know there were two narrow ways: the narrow way of the Pharisees, narrow-minded, narrow and moral about petty things, while excusing the grosser sins of pride, and the narrow way of Jesus, narrow and strict about denying self, but following the real way of the cross.

Now he thought to encourage his hearers to repent. They should not despair and imagine God would not receive them because they had committed serious sins. The apostle Paul showed them that he had been not only a sinner, but also a criminal who had condemned many saints to death, as the Herods had done throughout history. If he had been forgiven by God, surely Herod could obtain forgiveness.

He should realize that he too was on the wrong way.

Then Paul told Agrippa and those around him how Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and said, “Rise and stand on your feet,” that is, don’t follow the crowd, don’t live as you have been but be a real man who stands on his own two feet!

Jesus charged him to open people’s eyes so that they might receive by faith forgiveness of sins and an inheritance with all the saints.

What good news for Agrippa and Berenice! It was only necessary for them to believe in Jesus to have their worst sins forgiven immediately and to receive an inheritance with the saints, instead of being condemned to hell like their ancestors.

Paul was careful to remove the difficulty of attachment to traditional religion, which often obstructs the way of faith, even of those with only a superficial religion. He assured Agrippa: “I do not diverge at all from what Moses and the prophets have said.”

The whole concern of the apostle was for those lost souls, but his words and wisdom were wasted. Festus declared that Paul was beside himself, and Agrippa dispensed with his conscience by saying, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”

The time of visitation passed him by.

Do we way “almost” and let the day of repentance pass by?

The sinner who does not forsaken his sins with repentance and leave them at the foot of the cross is left with his lawless past. He remains an enemy of Jesus.

Pontius Pilate, Judge of the Greatest Jew

It is marvelous for a man with eyes to see to realize that Darius, Cyrus, Alexander the Great, and Romans like Herod worked without their will and knowledge to fulfill God’s plans for His kingdom. With the same eyes the believer looks at the great men of the world today. No matter who they are, no matter if they are strangers to the ways of God, they can still serve His purposes.

Pontius Pilate was a Roman who figured in a major way in the plan of redemption.

The Great Chance and the Great Misfortune of Pilate

History tells us that Pilate was a ruthless and harsh official. As a Roman procurator in Judea he proved to be a man who loved bribery and was guilty of violence, banditry, abuses, and offenses such as execution without trial.

Evil man that he was, he had an elected fate, namely, to be procurator in the Holy Land, in the midst of a people who worshiped the true God.

One might compare this to being born in a Christian country, where you are offered the possibility of salvation, where thousands of church bells witness to the gospel and urge you to come to Jesus Christ, the Savior. Today it is a great privilege to be born into a family of believers, who guide their children on the paths of God. So Pilate was fortunate to be sent to Judea.

But at that time God's people were in disarray and were not following their high calling, just as mainline Christianity today has fallen away and lost its mission.

Lukewarm Christians and a decadent Church are worse than paganism.

God's chosen people played a worse role in Jesus' crucifixion than Pilate the pagan. Pilate asked about Him, "What has He done?" whereas the Jewish leaders answered, "If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him into your hands." Pilate declared, "I find no fault in this Man." But the Jews found Him guilty: "He stirs up the people." Pilate repeated, "After investigating Him thoroughly before you, I find Him not guilty of the things you accuse Him of." The people cried, "Away with Him! Crucify Him!" Pilate insisted, "But what wrong has He done? I have not found Him guilty of any of your charges." The mob insisted, "He should die, because He made Himself the Son of God."

Even after they chose Barabbas over Jesus, Pilate made another attempt with them: "What shall I do with Jesus?" He hoped that once he had appeased them they would not be against setting Jesus free.

But no! They wanted Jesus to be crucified, at all cost.

Pilate had come to the country of God, to the chosen people of God, but they were like the fallen Christians of whom Peter wrote: "For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. (II Pet. 2:20, 21)

The Savior's words had come true: "The evil spirit, once it goes out of man, wanders in waterless places, looking for rest, but does not find it. Then he says, 'I shall go back to my house from which I came.' And when he goes back, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation." (Matt. 12:43-45)

Pilate learned nothing worthwhile from them. That is why Jesus, the accused, who tried His judge, tried him very mildly. "He who delivered Me to your hands has

committed the greater sin,” He said. Because of this, the Abyssinian Coptic Church went so far as to worship Pilate as a saint. Of course, this is foolishness. He was not saint. Yet in view of the condition of the Jews in his day, we can understand why he did not change his nature but remained as he had been before.

While other procurators made concessions to the Jews, who observed strictly the commandment not to worship idols and forbade Roman soldiers to enter Jerusalem wearing effigies of Caesar’s face, Pilate reversed the order, thus defying the people’s feelings. He seized money from the treasury of the temple to build canals in the city. When a crowd of people gathered, he spread among them a number of soldiers dressed like civilians but armed with rubber clubs to beat them at a given signal. On another occasion, he killed some Galileans who had come to Jerusalem to sacrifice, mixing their blood with the blood of the animals.

Pilate Meets Jesus

One day while he was sitting at table with his wife, some Jewish elders and scribes came to him to ask for a group of soldiers to arrest a person by the name of Jesus, who was causing trouble among the people. Pilate gave them such a contingent, without knowing that the most decisive moment of his life was coming.

Early on the morning of Passover, as Pilate was preparing to take his seat in the judgment hall, the Jews returned. As was his custom, Pilate sat down in his judgment seat, but the people did not enter his palace as they did at other times. Because it was Passover, they did not want to defile themselves by entering the courtyard of a pagan.

To enter the house of a pagan meant, according to Jewish tradition, to be defiled for a week, as when touching a corpse. On that evening, the evening of Nisan 14, according to the Jewish calendar, they had to eat the Passover lamb, which could be eaten only in a state of ceremonial purity. (Jesus had permitted Himself the freedom to eat the Passover lamb, together with His disciples, one day before the legal date, when He, the true Lamb, would be killed.)

Pilate was disgusted with their piety, because he knew their sins quite well.

But this is a law: the less religious a man is, the more he can show that he is.

During recent generations the Jews respected a great many religious traditions, which they have now largely abandoned. One of those was to use special plates for the

dishes with meat and the dishes with milk. The Talmud strictly forbids using a knife intended only for meat to cut a slice of cheese, and the reverse. Breaking these commandments was considered a great sin.

Our forebears were very careful about keeping these traditions. It is said their care was so great that even a murderer, when he went to kill, cried out to his wife, “You have given me the wrong knife! I cannot slaughter a man with the cheese knife. Give me the other knife.”

That man was breaking the essence of the Jewish religion—the interdiction to kill—but he kept tradition strictly.

Such absurdities often take place. In order not to be defiled by entering the house of a pagan, the Jewish mob would not enter Pilate’s judgment hall. They wanted to be able to eat the Passover in the evening. Meanwhile, they defiled their mouth by casting blame on Jesus and shouting with cries full of hatred.

Many think they are defiled by the uncleanness of others. But we are all unclean. Jesus said it is what comes out of a man’s heart that defiles him.

When Pilate saw that the crowd would not enter the praetorium, he went out to them. There he saw a roaring mob before him dragging a man who was bound, disfigured from abuse, exhausted in the early morning hours. It was Jesus. This was the decisive moment in Pilate’s life. In truth, the moment of meeting Jesus is the decisive moment in every man’s life. One’s entire future, and all eternity, depend upon how one responds to an encounter with Jesus.

Pilate Is Not Able to Be Serious

Pilate asked a procedural question of the crowd: “What is this man accused of?” The answer was, “If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him into your hands.” (John 18:29, 30) “Evildoer”—this about the Man from Nazareth, anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, who had walked from place to place doing good and curing all who were oppressed by the devil. (Acts 10:38)

Such an answer to a judge’s question was, of course, imprudent. But their impertinence was quite suitable for Pilate’s character.

When Pilate requested further specifics, the leaders of the people informed him of more accusations: “This man pretends to be king of Judea and stirs our nation to mutiny, forbidding us to pay tribute to Caesar.”

Since under the law Caesar was ruler of Judea, Jesus should be punished by death.

Before the Roman governor the people accused Jesus of being dangerous, while in their heart their real complaint was that He was not dangerous. They were like Potiphar’s wife, who complained about Joseph’s being a lecher when the pain in her heart was that Joseph was no lecher at all. The mob wanted Pilate to execute Jesus under the accusation that His kingdom was of this world. In point of fact, they could not forgive Him for calling Himself king while refusing to use force to rid them of their Roman oppressors. They did not dislike the idea of having a king of their own, but they did not want a king who was only a gentle rabbi. That demeaned their expectations. They wanted their king to be a warrior and a great conqueror.

Pilate entered the judgment hall with Jesus and addressed questions directly to the accused. The people who did not want to be defiled remained outside, thus missing a unique opportunity to hear the wonderful answers given by Jesus to Pilate.

Pilate probably spoke Greek, the language that Jesus’ accusers might also have used. Jesus would definitely have know it, since he grew up in Galilee where there were many foreigners.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asked.

The Roman governor had just had a good night of rest in a soft bed. He had probably bathed and perfumed his body in the morning. He was well dressed and well fed. The One who was standing in front of him had just gone through a night of deep turmoil in both soul and body, a night in which he was arrested, betrayed by one disciple, and denied by another. Jesus was exhausted, unwashed, His clothes in disorder, His face black and blue from being struck.

With this in mind, we realize that Pilate’s question was a mockery. As a matter of fact, an accused person invariably gives the impression of being inferior, which means a trial cannot really be fair.

After a moment of silence, while Jesus pondered whether to answer the leaders of His people in front of a foreign judge, He replied, “Are you saying this of yourself, or did

other tell you this about Me?” This is a good answer for all those who listen to gossip and small talk. When inquiring about the truth, instead of ignoring what people of ill-will say, Jesus had the right to reprimand him in the form of a question because He Himself never listened to gossip. Some individuals had come to Him once to report that Pilate had unfairly killed people, but Jesus dismissed the allegation and instead urged them to repent.

Of course, one needs to distinguish between “King of the Jews” as the Romans would have understood it, and “Messiah the King” sent by God with a spiritual commitment. The first step in making this distinction was to know where the accusation came from. That was what Jesus asked Pilate. He spoke like a person who wanted to find out the facts with respect to his case.

The question “Are you saying this, or did others tell you this about Me?” was a blow to Pilate’s cowardice and servility at the same time.

Like many other people, Pilate had never rendered an opinion on his own. He was the slave of others’ opinions and outcries. He took as policy what others said. Alas, how many people are like this!

But man was created to be connected to the Father in heaven and to hear wonderful words from Him. Man was given the ability to think. However, as a result of sin since the Fall, he will admit if he is honest that almost none of his opinions are truly his, but that he is the slave of the ideas and opinions that surround him.

Jesus further said simply, “You have said it,” a formula corresponding to “Yes, I am,” which was used in case a direct confirmation was dangerous.

Jesus assumed the title of king, a title His disciples felt befitted Him. The genealogies at the beginning of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke try to prove His right to this title by showing His direct descent from the kings of Israel.

Jesus is a King, but a King who is completely different from other kings, because He considers a multitude of royal functions insignificant.

For example, consider taxes. During the time of King David, the surrounding nations were obliged to pay tribute to the Jews. When Messiah came, they could not imagine how they could keep paying taxes to the Roman foreigners. They were sure they

would be set free and their roles would be changed. It was degrading for a king to submit to the present state of affairs.

But this did not concern Jesus. He was not preoccupied with the main function of a king, to maintain the independence of His kingdom. As far as He was concerned, Israel, whose true King He was, could have remained under Roman domination. His word was simply, "Give Caesar his due."

Ancient kings were judges too. But Jesus said clearly that He had not come here to judge. "He answered to a man who had requested Him a decision about a heritage: 'Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?'" (Luke 12:14) To the woman blamed for adultery He said, "I do not judge you. Go and sin no more." (John 8:11)

Kings head armies, but soldiers of King Jesus do not fight. He said, "If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would have fought for Me, not be delivered into the hands of the Jews." The apostle Peter received the order, "Put your sword back into its sheath." What kind of King was Jesus? He refused to fulfill the royal functions, one by one.

Jesus was King of Israel, in the sense that God is King of His people. God performed two main functions in its history: (1) He called Abraham and promised a people from his seed, and (2) He set up the laws of Israel. Jesus called a people again: spiritual Israel, the Christian Church, made up of the elect of God from every nation, and He issued a new law, the law of love. At the same time he retained the Last Judgment for Himself.

Of course, Pilate knew nothing about such matters. Things were quite simple for him. There was a man standing before him who admitted He claimed to be King of Israel. That was a crime against the Caesar, a crime punishable by death. There was no doubt of His guilt, since He acknowledged it.

However, strangely, instead of punishing Him, Pilate said clearly, "I find no fault in Him."

There is one possible explanation: Jesus did not convey an impression of seriousness to him. From His first words, Pilate considered Him a harmless enthusiast. Just like Herod, who on hearing Jesus' claim to be king, gave Him a shiny garment

instead of getting angry, Pilate did not take Jesus seriously. He did not know the moment of his visitation. Before Him stood the Savior of his soul and He did not recognize Him.

What a difference between Pilate and wise old Simeon! Devout Simeon, with the Holy Spirit to guide him, recognized the Savior of the world in an Infant who could not even babble. Pilate, on the other hand, did not take seriously either his duties as a man or as an official. He lived a frivolous life, full of idle talk. Now, faced with the ultimate challenge, he was unable to assess the situation properly. He did not comprehend the mission of Jesus, though he could offer Him freedom, just as Jesus could offer him salvation.

Herein lies the danger of a frivolous life. That is why Jesus said, “For every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.” (Matt. 12:36)

Pilate said very beautiful words about Jesus: “I find no fault in this man.” (Luke 23:4) But to find someone innocent is not necessarily proof of understanding or compassion. It can also be proof of frivolity.

God Tries to Save Pilate

The chief priests and the mob continued to blame Him. All this time, Jesus seemed not to hear the charges hurled against Him. Pilate asked, “Don’t you hear how many things they accuse You of?” When Jesus did not answer, the governor wondered much.

While he stands amazed, God throws him a lifeline. Pilate’s wife, who was allegedly a pagan who converted to the Jewish religion, apparently had paid attention to what her husband discussed with the Jews who sought Jesus’ condemnation. Because of what she heard, she could not sleep the whole night. Perhaps she fancied her husband tortured by eternal fire for the role he played in the crucifixion planned for Jesus. Women often have premonitions.

But what could she do? She knew that Jews were influential, that her husband might lose his position unless he pleased them. There had been many complaints against him thus far. But God’s voice won inside her. The greatest friendship is for the soul of the man who is dear to you.

While Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him: "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man, because I have suffered many things in a dream today because of Him." (Matt. 27:19)

Tradition says that later she became a Christian. Orthodoxy even worships her among the saints.

The most significant aspect for us is that God's finger is clearly seen throughout history. God had arranged that at the right moment Pilate would be warned before taking the final wrong step.

We might marvel at the various methods God uses to save souls. God tried to save Pilate through his wife's intervention. He tried to save Pilate's wife through a dream; Judas Iscariot by foot-washing; Malthus by restoring his ear; Peter by the crowing of a rooster; Herod by Jesus' silence; the Jews by signs and miracles; the Samaritans by unusual encounters; others by blessings.

Pilate Tries to Save Jesus

His wife's warning made a certain impression upon Pilate, and he tried to rescue Jesus. He asked the leaders of the people, "Why, what evil has He done?" But the only answer he received was, "Crucify Him!" It is the only answer given by the ignorant mob nowadays, too, when they are asked to justify their claims. Yet we should not be like Pilate who gave in so easily! If asked to make a judgment, we should base it on proper evidence, not the pressure of careless friends or the wanton mob.

Pilate's question, "What evil has He done?" remains without answer, as do many similar questions. When the Lord sent a prophet to the king Amaziah to ask, "Why have you sought the Edomites' gods, when they could not save their own people from your hands?" Amaziah responded, "Have I appointed you councilor to the king? Go away! Why do you want to be killed?" (II Chron. 25:15, 16) People often try to get rid of serious questions by refusing to answer them.

Since he could not receive a rational answer from the leaders, Pilate, weary of being involved in an internal Jewish quarrel, addressed the Prisoner with these words, "What, am I a Jew? Your nation and the high priests have delivered You into my hands. What have you done?"

In other words, Pilate was saying, “This whole matter is a national Jewish affair. What does it have to do with me?”

But this was an improper question. The Jews were God’s elect. Nothing of what is Jewish is only Jewish. The whole world should be interested in the destiny of the Jewish people.

Jesus could have offered a multitude of answers to the question: “What have you done?”

He could have answered, “It is through Me that the heavens and earth were made.” Or, “I made man.” He could have answered, “All things were made by Me, and nothing of what has been created was done without Me.” Or, “If what I have done had been written about thoroughly, this world would be too small for the books that could have been written.”

But it was no use for Jesus to give such answers. Pilate had not taken His first words seriously. What use would it be for him to discover something new?

There will come a day when the roles will be reversed, when Jesus will be the judge and Pilate the accused. Then Jesus will ask Pilate, “What have you done?” It is certain that he will not have an answer.

For the time being, Jesus insisted on settling one particular matter. Pilate said, “Your nation. . .has delivered You into my hands.” However, Jesus, who belongs to all of us, refused to acknowledge that a certain people should be called exclusively His nation.

Jesus Is Not Related to One Single Nation

Any time Israel committed a great sin, God, who had elected this people to be holy and a nation of priests, refused to acknowledge them as His. After they worshiped the golden calf in the wilderness, the Lord said to Moses, “Wake up and go down, for *your* people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.” (Ex. 32:7) Moses, surprised that the people were called his people, replied suddenly, “Lord, why should my anger grow against *Your* people?” (v. 11) But God was unrelenting and again referred to the children of Israel as those “whom *you* [Moses] brought out of the land of Egypt.” (Ex. 33:1) He did not accept them as His.

When the wife of the prophet Hosea gave birth to a son, the Lord gave the prophet a piece of advice: “Call him Lo-Ami [not my people], as you are not My people, and I will not be your God.” (Hos. 1:9)

Jesus would do the same. Pilate called the Jews “Your nation.” Jesus answered firmly, “My kingdom is not of this world.” That does not mean He would not be a King on the earth, but only that His kingdom would not be the result of normal historical development. Its establishment would not depend on the will of the people but on the power of God. His kingdom is not literal Israel; His kingdom is not related to an earthly nation, but it belongs to another world.

Today Jesus would say the same thing if He were to be reproached about the deeds of His professed followers: “This is what Your Christians do, what Your disciples do on earth!” He would dismiss those who call themselves “Christians” and would answer, “Real Christians, My true disciples, are not of this world, My Church is not of this world. My disciples do not do such things.”

Jesus is not related to any worldly institution or any particular group of people who have taken His name. His kingdom is the future kingdom, to which the Jews should also be attracted with a lot of love.

“My Kingdom Is Not of This World”

How sad are the words of Jesus said in His defense, to destroy in Pilate’s eyes the idea that He represented revolutionary earthly royalty. This world was created by Jesus, but it deviated so much that He could not base His kingdom in it.

By this phrase He separated Himself from all that was dear to Him in this world. Now, when only hours separated Him from the cross, He seemed to say farewell in an all-embracing glance: Farewell, land, drenched so many times with My tears, sweat, and blood!

Farewell, air, so many times inhaled! Soon you will receive My last breath.

Farewell, Jewish people, chosen among thousands and charged with so many gifts! “I have found you in a desert land, in a loneliness full of terrifying howls. I have surrounded you, have taken care of and watched over you, like the light of My eyes,” but “you have forsaken God, your Maker, you have ignored the Rock of your salvation!”

(Ref.???)

Farewell, Jerusalem, on whose streets I have walked and where I have preached the kingdom! “How often I wanted to gather your children together, as the hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you would not.” (Matt. 23:37)

Farewell, holy city, over which I have wept! Too soon you will weep for yourselves, and your children and you will be scattered abroad.

Jesus was thinking of all this when His lips uttered the words, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Here it is too cold for Me and My disciples.

His kingdom is not of this world, where self-aggrandizement and mean preoccupation with grandeur and power occupy men’s thoughts. His kingdom is in quiet and holy hearts.

People are engaged in the vain pursuit of happiness in this world. Here God does not have the necessary conditions to produce happiness, in the sense people understand this word. If God gives money to some people, others steal it. If He provides a mate, you and your spouse quarrel and all too frequently destroy the marriage. If He rescues you from danger, you soon imperil yourself elsewhere.

It is only in the kingdom of heaven that He can make you truly happy. Here are the poor in spirit; therefore, you will not face pride. Here are those who weep; they will sympathize with you. Here are the gentle; they will not oppress you. Here are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; they will not treat you unfairly. Here are the kind-hearted and merciful; they will soothe your pain. Here are the pure in heart; among them you will find steady friends. Here are the peacemakers; therefore, there will be no hatred and no war. Here angels are ready to serve you.

Do you doubt that there is such a kingdom? Then look at believers! Look at the power that enables them to shed the “old man,” their carnal nature, with its lusts and pleasures and conquer the world. This is the strength that has enabled the true Church to defy and defeat its enemies for two thousand years!

Is there any further doubt? Then look at Jesus! Listen to His teachings!

As if by magic, He who descended from heaven and returned to His Father brings the kingdom of God before your eyes.

He points to His loyal subjects: “Here there are many who come from the West and from the East and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of

heaven.” Jesus Himself will be with us at that table, as He said to His disciples at the last supper: “I shall not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on, until the day I drink with you again, in the kingdom of My Father.”

At the head of the table is Adam and with him the patriarchs of old. With them are the numberless multitudes of the saved down through the ages.

Jesus says that in the resurrection people will not get married, but will be like the angels in heaven. We shall fly from one place to another, loving each other without the limits, restrictions, partings, and pains of life here.

But it will not be an idle life. Some will hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things.” (Matt. 25:23) Looking up at the sky full of stars, Jesus says, “I will give you the morning star.” (Rev. 2:28)

There is also a place called “outer darkness,” where there is weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth.

In Jesus’ mouth, the kingdom of heaven becomes so real that you can feel it. You see the Archangel Michael rise, you hear Jehovah’s thunder, you see the shining light, you hear the river of life murmuring to you about God’s love, you see the crowns prepared for the saints, you view the tasty fruits awaiting you.

All this you can have only if you do not place your hope in this world, but believe in the One whose kingdom belongs to another world. All this you can have only if you take Jesus’ yoke upon you and understand that no one is assured of prosperity here and glory there. No one can pamper his body here and nurture his soul there. The cross precedes the crown.

It is this good news that Jesus brought to Pilate: “I have a kingdom which is not of this world, which does not pass away like the kingdoms that exist in the world today.”

Then He continued, “If My kingdom were of this world, I would have set up a political party Myself. My servants would have fought for Me not to be delivered into the hands of the Jews.” Jesus defended Himself in a very intelligent manner. But for Pilate, the thought that the few followers of Jesus could have fought for Him must have seemed ridiculous!

What Is Truth?

Pilate, who understood nothing of this, only said, “Then you are a king?” In other words, “You should realize I cannot distinguish between a kingdom of this world and that of another world. Therefore, if You continue to claim the title of king, You will be doomed.”

“Yes,” Jesus answered. “I am a king.”

But these words could be understood in various ways. The Stoics maintained that in principle the wise are kings and even the only kings. Philo stated the same thing. The Bible says that believers who have received God’s gift completely “are ruling in life.”

(Dan. 7:27 ??)

Jesus points out the spiritual character of His kingdom further on: “It is for this that I was born and have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Whoever is of the truth hears My voice.” (John 18:37)

If Jesus had accepted the deal offered by Satan to become ruler of this world, His would have been much better than Rome. People would have been much happier under His rule than under Caesar’s. Justice would have ruled instead of oppression. There would have been food instead of hunger, love and happiness instead of hatred. But to achieve such a state, Jesus would have had to use force and deception. You cannot achieve anything in this world without such means.

That is one reason why He refused Satan’s offer.

The aim of Jesus’ royalty was only to uncover the truth. Jesus knew His birth was not the fruit of an accident, as other people believed. He knew He was born for a purpose, to reveal the truth about His kingdom, which had been slandered on this earth. And He says, “Whoever is really for the truth hears My voice.” His sheep love the truth, and they listen to His voice.

To be of the truth—that is all. The major thing is not for a man to know as many truths as possible about God and His way. If he has only knowledge of the truth he will be doomed. The major thing for man is to be of the Truth, to realize the Truth in him. Then He will not be lost. He has the pledge in Psalm 25:12: “What man is he that fears the Lord? Him shall He teach in the way that He shall choose.”

The main thing, if you do not want to delude yourself, is to have the truth within, that is, to have honest and strong beliefs.

Jesus did not provide pre-ripened truths to mankind. This was not necessary since man was given the capacity to think, and it is his business to use this capacity to fulfill the great object of thought: to find out the truth.

For this, logic is needed. But in addition, it is necessary to have good will, because without it a man can know all the pain of logic and yet reason falsely. Jesus taught that good will was necessary to receive the truth, no matter what it is, no matter how much it contradicts family or national interests, customs, religion, prejudices, and personal desires for comfort.

This is what it means to be of the truth: To believe something only if it is true, not if it accords with your feelings. Thomas Aquinas expressed very well how far this love of truth goes: “A cause is not right because God wants it, but God wants it because it is right.”

But what would skeptical Pilate understand about such things? What would the words “To be of the truth” communicate to him?

If he harbored a gleam of interest for serious matters, he would prefer to know the answer to his completely fruitless question, “What is the truth?”—which he even asked of Jesus. But he knew the answer was an unrevealed secret to the greatest philosophers. What could he possibly learn from a simple Prisoner bound before him?

And so, after tossing this question to the wind, he left immediately without waiting for an answer. As a matter of fact, he would not have gotten the answer he wanted because Jesus did not come so much to proclaim new truths as to provide an example for a life of truth. The abstract question “What is truth?” has no satisfactory answer unless you are satisfied with jokes. You should *be of the truth*; this is the main thing!

In an older book entitled *Acts of Pilate*, the Roman governor’s question does not remain without answer. According to this book, Jesus replied, “The truth is in heaven.” Then Pilate asked, “Is there no truth on earth?” Jesus held out His bound hands and said to him, “Look how those who hold the truth are judged by those who have authority on earth!”

This apocryphal dialog does not provide an answer to the question “What is truth?” either, because that was not what Jesus came to reveal on earth, much as we might

have desired it. This question has engaged the blood and tears of mankind since the beginning of history! Every party, every confession, every trend of thought declares it has the truth, while its rivals cry firmly that they hold the truth.

The result has been a terrible struggle between multiple ideologies. The honest soul cannot help being confused: Which of the many should be believed?

The right answer is important, since anything less can lead to eternal damnation, just like any other sin. You cannot be saved in any faith, but only in the true one, given once for all to all the saints. If the Word of God threatens murderers, adulterers, drunkards, idol-worshippers, liars, and so on, with hell, then it is with hell that He threatens heretics, namely, those who have false faith. (See Gal. 5:20, in the original.)

A man can be murdered not only by a blow to the heart, but also by a blow to the head. It is not only a guilty heart that dooms you before God, but also false thinking. In the judgment day we will be asked not only if we have led a proper life, but also if we have had the right faith. The apostle John writes, "Whosoever transgresses and abides not in the doctrine of Christ, has not God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ, he has both the Father and the Son." (I John 1:9) But if a person does not have God, he has hell.

Truth is most precious to God. Thousands of saints have sacrificed their lives to keep the truth. Thousands of martyrs have shed their blood for truth to be spread.

It is for truth that God sacrificed even His Son Jesus, who said, "I was born and came into the world to bear witness to the truth." (John 18:37)

Truth is more precious than the whole creation in the eyes of God, as Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not." It is easy to understand. God can create many worlds, but not even He can create another truth. Truth is a unity.

To avoid perishing for eternity, man should know and embrace truth, the only truth about God, since God is the God of truth. Then he should live the truth as imparted to him by God.

But what is the real truth? Of the hundreds of religious doctrines, which is the right one? Which is the correct system of morality, of the dozens of such systems? Though it is important for me to know, it is difficult to distinguish what is truth indeed.

Furthermore, it is not only difficult, but it is absolutely impossible for man to hold the one truth that saves, because it is impossible for him to grasp it by his own power.

This is another aspect of the human tragedy, It is only the pure in heart who can enter the kingdom of God—but no man is holy. No one who does not have the truth and does not practice it can have eternal life—but we humans do not hold the truth, nor can we find it.

The assertions of so many millions of people that they alone hold the truth and that the beliefs of others are errors that should be overcome are a ridiculous illusion! Such people have no truth at all and moreover lack the necessary premise to find the truth. Most lack the intellectual capacity to search for it. The notions by which we think depend on concentrated experiences. But the art of handling notions is not in-born, is not given to every man. It requires deep thinking, of which few people are capable. In fact, most people accept blindly as truth what another declares to be truth, without checking it out first. They have neither the capacity nor the desire to do so.

Nor do thinkers have absolute truth. A man's system of thinking is always determined by his historical situation, as well as by his own state of body and mind. The question as to which system of thinking is correct is wrong. The essence is different. Broadly speaking, absolute truth is independent of time, space and historical development. It is ridiculous for one man to claim to discover "the real truth" when it is determined by his intellectual capacity and surroundings, by his knowledge and development, and then to start a ridiculous struggle against another "real truth" discovered by some other little man. Such individuals consider their system of thinking the real one and see those who turn their back on it as departing from truth itself. Every such "holder of truth" is convinced that all others are dolts, or charlatans, but only he has discovered the philosopher's stone.

This has been repeated throughout the history of the world, as well as in the history of religions, hundreds and thousands of times. You wonder that they are taken seriously by anyone. But there are always those who do so and who harshly condemn those who do not.

People get lost in a morality that they themselves invented and that God describes as "filthy rags."

Man has to find the truth, but he cannot have the truth. The truths we can find on our own are partial, relative.

Truth and error are relative notions. What can be truth today can be error tomorrow, and vice versa. The whole Bible is witness to this fact. For Abraham, the sacrifice of his son was a lofty act of faith. But if there were a believer today who admired Abraham for the act of stabbing his son, Abraham's descendants would tie him hand and foot and take him to the madhouse. The truth of yesterday has become error today. King Saul spared some of his Amalekite enemies. Samuel, the prophet of God, became angry at him because of this and told him he was forsaken. By way of contrast, Jesus' precise commandment now is to love our enemies. From our present point of view, we would doom Saul not because he spared his enemies, but because he did not spare all of them. His guilt of yesterday would be meritorious today. Error has become truth. We could provide many more examples.

The mind of a genius and the combined observations of a whole generation would not be enough to discover truth, which would have to reflect the experience of all people till the end of time—and even then it would be inadequate.

Just as there are mathematical problems that are solvable in an endless series, so the problem of truth is resolved. Man, always the child of an epoch, cannot have the truth. He can discover a partial truth and then will probably commit the error of bestowing an incongruous value to it. He can perform the praiseworthy act of discovering a partial truth, but since few have the capacity to leave it for future generations to assess its value, he may turn around and despise others who do not hold this "truth."

Human concepts are continually changing and often vanishing. There is no point where we can stop and say, "We have discovered the truth."

How tragic is human life! It is bereft of the very things that are necessary. There are souls who cannot live without truth, as others cannot live without air and water. But truth is found nowhere. In their torment, these souls fall prey to charlatans, to numerous confessions that proclaim eternal, absolute, newly discovered truths, and so they wander from one confession to another.

The problem of truth is as insoluble for man as the possibility for him to acquire purity and holiness by his own efforts. The truth is in heaven. As man cannot have purity apart from what God gives him through Jesus, so he cannot have truth unless God gives it

to him, without human strife, without payment, without the fulfillment of any other condition but faith.

Our brain, flesh, and blood cannot discover truth in the field of faith. It must come to us from the Father in heaven.

Truth, like purity and holiness, is acquired by faith. I believe there is a Father's heart that beats for me in the center of the universe. I believe this Father does not give His children a stone instead of bread and a snake instead of fish. I believe He sent His Son into the world to confess the truth and to die that I might have His righteousness. I know that by His sacrifice I am saved and am a child of God. I believe that my life and my thinking are part of the truth, at this moment, because of Him.

My search for the truth has stopped. I am in it by faith.

The truth is Jesus, the One who came from heaven, not what I have discovered with my human mind.

But such thoughts did not occur to Pilate. He was amazed by the Savior's words: "It is for this that I was born and came into the world, to bear witness to the truth."

It is possible that his question "What is truth?" expressed surprise: "Is this the time for You to debate about truth when Your life is in danger? What is truth that You are willing to put Yourself in so much danger for it?"

For Jesus, as well as for any holy being, the question was, of course, quite different: "What are riches, honor, pleasure, even life, in comparison with the Truth, which is above all?" But as I said before, such thoughts were beyond the realm of Pilate, the lightweight.

Pilate's Last Hesitations

The cries of the mob who were clamoring for crucifixion had become more and more insistent outside. The Latin proverb says, *Vox populi, vox dei*, "The voice of the people is the voice of God." But the facts were otherwise: The voice of the people was the voice of an uncontrollable mob.

Going out to face the mob, Pilate said, "I cannot find any guilt in Him. Therefore, after I beat Him, I will release Him." He considered Jesus innocent, absolutely innocent, but still he was willing to give Him a beating.

The apostles received the same treatment. Gamaliel advised the Sanhedrin, “And now I say to you, keep away from these men, and let them alone; for if this counsel or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God. And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.” (Acts 5:38-40)

They agreed to leave the apostles alone, but at the same time they decided a beating would be good for them.

On another occasion, the mob in the temple cried out against the apostle Paul, “Take such a man from the earth! He is not worthy to live.” Then the captain ordered that Paul be taken to the fortress to be whipped in order to find out why the people were assailing him. Instead of questioning the protestors, he considered it expedient to give a beating to their victim, before learning that he was completely innocent.

This is how the mob proceeds today against those with whom they are displeased. Regardless of guilt or innocence, they consider it expedient to bad-mouth or beat them.

The Greek expression “I shall apply correction to him” is the awful custom of people who consider it their duty to correct their fellow man. Pilate felt he was called to correct Jesus by giving Him a beating.

Maybe Pilate committed such a foul act with the thought that this might appease the Jews. Perhaps he hoped that seeing Jesus whipped would arouse their compassion and they would give up the demand for crucifixion. But even with such a “good” thought, the fact of delivering Jesus to be whipped was terrible.

Under the influence of the mob it is inevitable that one commit such mean acts. Thus we see Pilate saying first, “I find no guilt in this Man.” (Luke 23:4) A few moments later, battered by the continuing cries of the mob, he gives in and does not say he finds no guilt in Jesus, but only, “He has done nothing worthy of death.” A little while later, he first delivers Him to a whipping and then to death. The One who was found not guilty at first and later not guilty of death is now delivered to be crucified.

We should beware of joining a mob! The Scripture tells Christians, “You have been bought with a price. Therefore, do not make yourselves slaves of men.” Let people

say what they want. Do not let them determine your attitude as did Pilate, the miserable governor who made himself the slave of the mob he was appointed to rule.

Yet we bear in mind his one statement: "I find no guilt in this Man." The heathen judge declares before all the people that Jesus is the faultless sacrifice who is received by God, as prescribed by the ancient law. (Lev. 22:10)

The Scourging

Wanting to please the people, Pilate had Jesus scourged.

It was Messiah's destiny to bear this. Every time we beat someone, it is He who is beaten. For our betrayals, it is He who is betrayed. When we mock people publicly, it is He who is mocked, as He was by a cohort of soldiers. When we leave our fellow men naked, it is He who is deprived of His clothes. For all the poor people to whom we give rags in our stinginess, it is He who is dressed to be mocked. Because we wound each other, it is He who is wounded by the crown of thorns. Because we mock and spit at people, it is He who is mocked and spat upon.

A Christian mystical woman, Catherine Emmerich, had a vision in which she claims the scene of Jesus' whipping was revealed to her. She describes it in the following words, which we present as a possible scenario:

"There was a pillar where whippings were performed, north from Herod's palace, a short distance from the bodyguards. The executioners had come with whips, rods and ropes, which they threw at the foot of the pillar. They were six black people, shorter than Jesus, with ruffled hair, and sparsely bearded. The clothes they wore consisted of a girdle around their thighs, cheap sandals, and a piece of coarse cloth, open on the side, that covered their chest and back. Their arms were bare.

"They were malefactors from the borders of Egypt, sentenced for their crimes to work at canals and public buildings, of whom the most abject were performing the function of executioners in the praetorium. They had punched the Savior, pulled Him with ropes, and, though He let Himself be carried without opposition, tied Him brutally to the pillar. That pillar was completely isolated and did not serve as support for the building.

"The pillar was not very high. A tall man, if he stretched his arm up, could have touched its top, which was round and had an iron ring. Their whips, with iron thorns at

their tops, tore off pieces of flesh. However, their fury was unopposed. They attached Jesus again, His back against the pillar.

“As He could barely stand, they tied ropes around His chest, under His arms, and above His knees. Then they tied His hands at the back of the pillar. His whole body was painfully contracting. He was covered with blood and wounds. Now they rushed upon Him again like mad dogs. One of them had a rod in his hand, with which he hit Him across the cheeks. The Savior’s body was full of wounds. He looked at His executioners, His eyes full of blood, and seemed to ask for mercy. But their anger kept growing, while Jesus’ forces were getting weaker and weaker.

“The horrible whipping had lasted for three quarters of an hour, when a relative of a blind man who had been cured by Jesus rushed behind the pillar, scythe-like knife in his hand. He cried with an indignant voice, ‘Stop it! Do not beat this innocent Man to death!’ The executioners, drunk, stopped in surprise. He quickly cut the ropes that held Jesus, then ran away and was lost in the crowd.

“Jesus fell down, almost unconscious, on the ground at the foot of the pillar, bathed in His own blood. The executioners left Him there and went to have a drink. On their way, they called some servants busy with the bodyguards and ordered them to prepare the crown of thorns.

“Jesus, covered with bleeding wounds, was writhing in convulsions at the foot of the pillar. Some lost girls, with an impudent countenance, came close to Him, holding hands! They stopped for a moment and looked at Him, disgusted. At that moment, the pain of His wounds increased and He turned His bruised face toward them. They went away, and the soldiers addressed them with indecent words, laughing.”

This hour of whipping would have been awful for those who loved Him. It seemed to be endless. Now his friends might have wished a quick death would release him from so much pain.

But Jesus was still to bear more.

The Mockery of the Soldiers

After whipping Him, the soldiers brought Jesus into the yard and gathered together the whole contingent of soldiers. In mockery they dressed Him in a scarlet robe, to imitate the royal purple.

At another time, Satan had offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. More recently the Jews wanted to make him king. He rejected these offers as a temptation. Now He is dressed as in a parody. But it is because of His very humiliation that God raised Him, after the resurrection, to sit at His right hand in heavenly places, above any reign, any dominion, any power, any rule, and any name that can be named, in this age or the next.

The soldiers set a crown of thorns, made with great care, on His head and pressed it down on His tender flesh.

The wise man wrote, “The way of the slothful man is as a hedge of thorns.” (Prov. 15:19) But it is not only the way of the slothful, but the head of the Righteous One who took upon Himself our slothfulness.

There were thorns on the path of His life that had bruised Him. So many had hated Him. But He could and still can say the words from the Song of Songs, “As the lily among thorns, so is My love among the daughters.” (Song 2:2)

The flowers were faithful to Him when everyone forsook Him. They caressed Him, diffusing their soft perfume to Him from the garden close to the place of crucifixion. Jesus has and will have at all times lily-like souls in the midst of thorns. These souls are His whole joy. It is for their sake that He bore the crown of thorns with resignation.

As the birds often make nests among thorns, knowing they are safer there, we too have found a nest for our souls among the thorns Jesus bore. The hand of our great enemy cannot intrude there.

The soldiers put a torn reed in Jesus’ right hand. He did not throw it away, but held it firmly in His right hand. Those who are weaker in faith should know how carefully Jesus kept the torn reed.

It is written, “A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench.” (Matt. 12:20)

After adorning Him like this, the soldiers knelt before Him, scoffed at Him, and said, “Bow down, it’s the King of the Jews!” It was a mocking bow, like that of many Christians. Then they took the reed and beat Him on the head with it. While Jesus does

not break or throw away a torn reed, if He does not toss aside His weakest believers, it is no less true that their sins come down on His head: their weaknesses condemn Him.

After the Scourging

After the scourging and the soldiers' mockery, Jesus was brought back to the trial room. He could barely stand, because a Roman beating was brutal. We have an eyewitness description from an epistle of Eusebius to the Church of Smyrna: "All around us we were horrified to see martyrs slashed by whips, their skin and flesh torn from them; their veins and muscles could be seen inside. Even their entrails could be seen."

Pilate, as governor, had to attend the scourging. Even his heart must have been moved to see such a Man, whose innocence he himself confessed, turned into a martyr. His words that Jesus was blameless were a blow to His accusers. But those words reflected on Pilate too, showing him to be a scoundrel.

Pilate went out to the mob together with Jesus and told them, "Here is the Man." Without knowing it, he uttered holy words, since Jesus is the real Man, the King of all men. However, the priests and rulers led the mob in shouting, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!"

Pilate then said, "Take Him and crucify Him," though he knew that a subject people did not have the right to crucify anyone.

The people insisted, "We have a law, and according to this law He should die, because He made Himself the Son of God."

It is remarkable how many truths were uttered by Jesus' enemies. Caiaphas' word was true: "It is expedient that one man should die for the people," since Jesus' death was for the salvation of all. (John 18:14) The Jews' cry, though uttered as a judgment, was also true: "Let His blood be upon us and upon our children!" For almost two thousand years since then, the prayer of the Christian Church has been for the expiating blood of Jesus to come as a blessing upon Jewish people, washing away the guilt of their heinous sin.

It was also true that the Jews had a law condemning anyone to death for declaring Himself to be the Son of God: "Whoever blasphemes the name of God should die." It is blasphemy for a mere man to declare himself the Son of God. According to this

law, Jesus had to die. However, according to this law, Messiah could not come down to this earth unless He could prove He was indeed the Son of God.

Isaiah had prophesied about Him: “To us a Child is born, to us a Son is given. . . His name will be called. . .Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isa. 9:6)

This Child, foretold by the prophets, once He entered upon His ministry, could not avoid calling Himself the Son of God, because He was indeed. Should He then be killed?

The Jews did not take into account the fact that we are all subjects of divine law, except God Himself. He is not bound by His own laws, since they emanate from Him. As He can alter the laws of nature to fulfill His miracles, so the laws He gave to men stop when He Himself intervenes.

Messiah Himself, the Son of God, was the fulfillment of the law.

The Jews should not have judged Him according to their law, but they should have asked Him what new law He had brought to them. But they were shouting, “We have a law, and according to this law He should die!”

How often such words are heard today too! Unjust people make laws that oppress the innocent, punish the good, mock justice. Then they say solemnly, “This is the law.” And everyone should obey.

In countries bereft of real Christian civilization there are laws permitting killing, prostitution, slander, drunkenness, robbing widows and orphans, at the same time forbidding activities that benefit society. According to these laws, a righteous person, even the very Holy Spirit who guides him, should die.

Over the years many governments have passed laws forbidding the very activities endorsed and commanded by God.

If a believer obeys all the laws of this world, the furies of lying, adultery, and fear will come to his deathbed, and he will hear from their mouth: “We have a law, and according to this law you should die.”

The faithful should distinguish between divine law and human law and should not submit to the human order against truth and justice. The believer himself shares the divine nature. Thus he fulfills the law.

The world has many laws according to which the Christian's faith should die. These laws, often based on superstition or religious or atheistic views, cannot be opposed without punishment. But the apostle Paul says that if he tries to please people, he is not a servant of Jesus. "You are not your own, for you were bought at a price." "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." (Gal. 2:20)

What does all this have to do with the Jews who were crying, "We have a law, and according to our law He should die?" Pilate was not obliged to follow their law.

When Pilate heard their statement, "He makes Himself the Son of God," he was seized with even greater fear. He asked Jesus, "Where are You from?" But he was not worthy of an answer.

What difference does it make to a judge where the accused is from? His duty is to do justice, irrespective of whether the accused is from Nazareth or heaven. If a judge first tries to find out whom he is dealing with in order to decide his case, he is not worthy of an answer.

At the Council of Constance, the Reformer Jan Huss did not answer his prejudiced judges.

Pilate said further, "You won't talk to me? Don't You know I have the power to release You and the power to crucify You?"

Thus, the judge reminded the accused of one principle of Roman law, that only the one with power to forgive has power to punish. Jesus, hands bound for crucifixion, could have trusted that He might be acquitted.

But alas, Pilate boasted about the power he had by law, but which in fact he had not, since he was a slave to popular opinion.

It is said about Bernard Palissy, inventor of ceramics and enamel, that when he was thrown into the infamous Bastille prison because of his faith in the gospel, he was visited by King Henry III. In another cell there were two noble young ladies imprisoned for the same "crime." The King said to Palissy, "My good man! For forty-five years you have served my mother, and I have tolerated you and your faith thus far, amidst the fire and killings to which those with the same faith as yours are subjected. However, now I

am obliged by my people and the party of the princes de Guise to throw you into the dungeon, you and these two young ladies. They and you will be burnt alive if you do not recant.”

Palissy replied, “Sir, you have said many times that you feel pity for me. However, I should tell you I feel pity for Your Majesty when I hear you say, ‘I am obliged.’ A king should not speak like this. These two girls and myself teach you the royal manner of speaking. Neither the party of the princes de Guise nor all your people nor Your Majesty can make a potter like me bend his knees before your icons, because we know how to die.”

As for Pilate, impressed as he was by the fact that Jesus did not insist on His release, though it would have been easy for Him to do so, he tried to release Him.

The cries outside were becoming stronger. Pilate’s power over his people was compromised. Some time before, they had succeeded in obliging him to change his mind and have the Roman standards with the effigy of Caesar removed from Jerusalem. After that, they knew how to squeeze concessions out of him: by crying loudly.

In particular, they knew a cry Pilate could not resist, and they used it now: “If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar’s. Whoever makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar.” It is the same accusation brought today against faithful Christians in many countries, that they are the enemies of the state.

Pilate asked once more, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.”

What a terrible denial! In their synagogues they chanted the song called *Avim malkem*: “Our Father and our King. We have no other King but You.”

Once before, Jesus had been told, “We have never been anyone’s slaves.” Now they declare before Pilate, “We have no king but Caesar.”

How bitterly was this cry of the Jews to play out during their long tragic history!

They did not want Jesus as their king, the One who did not compel anyone who came to Him. Instead, they chose Caesar, who, shortly after, was to order the banishment of all Jews from Rome. Eventually Caesar destroyed Jerusalem and their fatherland, the land of Israel.

History has repeated itself ever since.

In 1842, in Frankfurt-am-Main, the Association of Friends of the Reform (to reform the Jewish religion) was organized. Their program contained the following point: “We neither expect nor wish Messiah, who would take the Israelis back to Palestine. We know no other land but that to which we belong by birth and right of citizenship [namely, Germany].”

The Association for the Reform of Jewry was set up in 1845 in Berlin. In its manifesto were these words: “We cannot pray with our heart any more for an earthly Messianic kingdom, which would take us as from a foreign country, from the motherlands to which we are attached with all the ties of love, to lead us to the country of our ancestors.”

What are these declarations but the old Jewish cry to forsake God: “We have no king but Caesar”? Since then, what has become of Jewry in Germany? How did “Caesar” treat them? How did their “motherland,” to which they were attached by all the ties of love, treat them?

But if the historical truth is that the Jews have not had another king but Caesar, Jesus, according to the prophecies, should have been recognized as the real Messiah, since He was to come when the scepter would depart from Judah and the staff from between his feet. (Gen. 49:10) Nevertheless, what do prophecies mean to an enraged mob? They were shouting, “Take Him away, take Him away, crucify Him!” These cries may have been in Greek: “*Aron, aron, starason auton!*” If so, the cry *aron* might have aroused in Jesus’ mind the image of Aaron, the great high priest. Pilate called him king. Now the crowd thoughtlessly chanted, “Aaron, Aaron!”—great Priest.

Jesus or Barabbas

There was only one other possibility for Pilate to rescue Jesus, without compromising himself by absolving a person accused of having pretended to be the king of the Jews.

Although it was contrary to any juridical principle that the right to pardon should be granted to a motley crowd, the ruler used to set free whatever prisoner the people wanted at the Passover feast. At that time there was a famous prisoner called Barabbas. Pilate decided on this stratagem: “Whom do you want me to set free, Barabbas or Jesus?” Do you want me to set free the King of the Jews?

Pilate, who knew that because of envy they had delivered Jesus into his hands, should certainly not have asked that question of the unruly mob. He should have absolved Him, not proposed His pardon to such people. Envious people should not even be listened to.

Yet there was a mixture of good with cowardice, carelessness, and cruelty in Pilate. That is why, instead of making the decision himself about one of the prisoners, he threw the question to the mob. But he used poor judgment in doing so. He stirred them up by using the title “King of the Jews.”

The people were now confronted with a choice such as we face before every sin that tempts us. What choice would we have made?

Jesus, as well as Barabbas, is imprisoned in the heart of every one of us. If our inner Barabbas wants to do something, our conscience rebukes us. If our inner Jesus wants to do something, the evil one opposes it. The heavenly Judge asks us too: “Whom do you want set free? Do you want to serve sin without remorse, or Jesus without hesitation? What choice will you make?”

The people had no doubt. At the instigation of the priests and rulers, they requested the pardon of the murderous insurrectionist Barabbas. To Pilate, the choice between Jesus and Barabbas must have seemed the choice between a self-proclaimed king and a man who had seduced them for a moment, a son of the people, a hero of independence who had the courage to take the sword in his hand for his cause. But what could be served by believing in an arrested and bound Messiah, who could not fulfill their political aspirations? And then perhaps Barabbas was not a name but a title: *Bar-abbas*, namely, son of a rabbi, or father.

Everyone was sure of the choice that had to be made: Barabbas should be set free.

Jesus himself must have prayed for the people to request Barabbas, because extension of life meant a new opportunity for the insurrectionist to seek repentance.

As a matter of fact, his name is curious. It might be Bar-raban, son of a rabbi, but then we would have to admit that the text of the Gospel distorts his name. Some people assume this. But if we take the text as it is, we have Bar-Abba, son of the father, just as the Savior is Son of the Father.

In addition, some old manuscripts give him the name Jesus Barabbas, which is not unlikely, because the Hebrew name Joshua (or Jeshua—Jesus) was and still is current among Jews. But even without this, there were two prisoners standing before the people who might have been called Bar-Abba, son of the father. If Jesus is Son of the Father, the sinner should not despair, since he too is a Bar-Abba, a son of the Father in the eyes of God. Does this show that the Father has two sons, a pure Bar-Abba, and another, a killer, sentenced to death? That Bar-Abba, the Son of the Father who was pure, set free Bar-Abba the sinner? Those who see in the Gospels the good news about the sinner's forgiveness by the blood of Jesus will of course be glad for such an interpretation.

The people chose Barabbas.

Pilate asks further, "But what shall I do with Jesus?" He hoped that, once he satisfied them and released the man of their choice, they would agree to set the second one free as well.

But this does not exonerate Pilate. He should not have asked others what to do with Jesus. What have you done with Jesus, Pilate? What do you say about Him?

The people continue to shout, "Let Him be crucified!" Thus they proved that Jesus was right long before when He reproached them: "You are trying to kill Me." They had answered then, "Who would kill You?" But Jesus knew their souls better than they did themselves. Now they demanded His blood. A thirst for blood had aroused the basest instincts of the mob. Like beasts they shouted, "Let Him be crucified!"

Since that terrible day, this is how Jews have answered the question, "What shall we do with Jesus?" Later there came a time when the nations asked, "What shall we do with the Jews?" In their blindness, they have found no other solution than that the Jews should be killed.

Pilate gave up. This was the decisive moment in his life. His eternal destiny was being decided. He lost his opportunity.

You need not commit a great sin like this. Pilate did not commit some great sin either. He only refused what 99 percent of people refuse: namely, to prefer abstract justice in the case of a helpless man to the interests of a whole empire, as well as his own self-interest as he saw it. We all commit this sin. Who places justice above his own self-interest?

Pilate is our brother. He is a sinner like us. And like people today, he thinks of washing his hands of the sin he commits today by sending Jesus to death. It is a superstitious practice, a sterile ceremony.

Pilate Washes His Hands

Probably because of the clamor of the mob not everyone heard Pilate's words. However, everyone could have seen him wash his hands. That is why he ordered a basin to be brought so that he could wash his hands in front of them, saying, "I am not guilty of this Man's blood."

Yet a man does not wash away his guilt in this manner. A man cannot be innocent before God if he does not decisively defend the truth. Whoever is not with Jesus is against Him. Pilate futilely declared his innocence. His words were useless compared to his acts.

If he really wanted to be clean, he should have asked Jesus for the water of life.

The crowd, unimpressed by Pilate's gesture, cried out, "The blood of Jesus be upon us and upon our children!"

In spite of his convictions, Pilate followed his weak course to the bitter end. Jesus was taken away to be crucified. The pathetic result of his attempts to defend Him was that the Savior ended up both whipped and killed. In fact, he did even more than the mob had asked by having Jesus scourged.

Secrets of God!

"The earth is given into the hand of the wicked. He covers the faces of its judges. If it is not He, who else could it be?" (Job 9:24)

God allowed Pilate's heart to be turned to stone so that he would not follow the path of salvation. When he sent Jesus to death, he avoided ordering the soldiers not to mock Him before the crucifixion, though he surely knew their coarseness and could have stopped them. His own baseness is thus further revealed.

Curiously, it is a feature of those who give in to the devil in major matters that they are often meticulous about petty details. A believer who indulges in grave sin will resist the devil when it comes to a matter of etiquette.

Pilate falls into this category. After sending Jesus to death he stubbornly refused to change the sign affixed to the cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," at the

request of the chief priests. Jesus is God, and God is the King of Israel. This piece of truth was proclaimed from Golgotha. But was this resistance about this matter enough for Pilate to be justified before God? Of course not. All his torments to justify himself were in vain, before God or before us.

The Breaking of the Legs

It was the eve of the most important Jewish feast, and the leaders did not want the holy day marred by the presence of felons hanging on the cross on Sabbath. Crucifixion was not a quick death. The nails did not pierce any vital organs. As the blood thickened over the wounds, the doomed died slowly, in an agony that could last several days. The sight would have spoiled the Jewish high day.

The leaders of the Jews went to Pilate with a request: “We have crucified the three felons. We would like to break their legs so they can be taken down from the cross without the possibility of escape. Then we can celebrate the Passover according to our custom.

They must have winked shrewdly when they made that proposition. People can be smug when such practical solutions come to mind.

In fact, there was a more practical solution. If they did not want to be troubled by the presence of some bodies on the cross during Passover, they could have performed an act of mercy and taken down the bodies of those still alive, allowing them to recover. The decision was otherwise.

Pilate accepted the proposition of the leaders. It was not to his credit that Jesus was already dead and did not have to bear any more pain. However, the thieves were further brutalized when the soldiers broke their shinbones.

Jesus’ Burial

A rich man from Arimathea called Joseph, a good man, came in the evening to Pilate and requested Jesus’ body. In the request one can see human helplessness in the face of death. The only thing we can do for someone dear to us who has passed away is to take care of the body.

Pilate order, “Give him the corpse!” The evangelist Mark uses the Greek word *ptoma* for corpse, a vulgar word used for animal carcasses, rather than *soma*, which is respectful. This was Pilate’s last recorded word, a word of scorn for Jesus.

The centurion who repented at the cross must have talked to Pilate about salvation. Others must have done so to. But it was no use. He did not know the hour of his visitation and thus destroyed his soul for eternity.

Donations of continuing the missionary work of late pastor Richard Wurmbrand, his wife Sabina and son, Michael may be sent to:

Help for Refugees

PO Box 5161

Torrance, Ca. 90510, USA

Web Address: <https://helpforrefugees.com>