

In my previous article, I pointed to some of the details of the way in which God sent His Son into the world in order to accomplish our great salvation. We saw how He determined the time and place of His Son's incarnation and chose to work through particular people, then thought about some aspects of the earthly life and ministry of the Lord Jesus. This time, I want to share a few thoughts on how our great salvation was brought about through the wickedness of men.

In making this point, it is essential to establish the fact that God is never the author of sin and evil: "*Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God", for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.*" (James 1:13) God is sovereign, however, so He worked even through the wickedness of human beings in order to bring about "*such a great salvation*" (Heb 2:3). We should be so grateful that all the combined violent animosity directed at Jesus was never at any point out of the Father's sovereign control. That included:

KING HEROD'S MALIGNITY

Let's go back to the early days of the Lord's incarnation. Jesus would have been between one and two-and-a-half years old when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem and went to Herod (that is, Herod the Great, who reigned 37–4 BC), who, on being told of Jesus's birth, determined immediately to kill Him. But "*an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."* The family "*remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."*" (Matthew 2:13–14, quoting Hosea 11:1)

We can see that the hostility, which would ultimately lead to the cry for the crucifixion of Jesus, was present in the world from the very start of His earthly life. That Herod's malignity was included in God's sovereign plan is clearly indicated by the fact that it was prophesied seven-hundred and fifty years previously.

THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS' ANIMOSITY

Jesus was teaching in a synagogue when a man with a withered hand was present. "*And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him.*" As expected, Jesus cured the man, but the religious leaders "*were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.*" (Lk 6:7–11) That animosity began in the early days of Jesus' ministry and continued to deepen – so much so, that it was patently obvious at the end, especially to Pilate, "*that it was out of envy they had delivered him up.*" (Mt 27:17,18) Pilate saw through all the pretended reasons for accusing Jesus to the reality of the leaders' depths of hatred!

Jesus told His disciples, at the Last Supper, "*the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: "They hated me without a cause."*" (John 15:25) This reference to Psalm 69:4, which was written about nine-hundred years earlier, showed that even the religious leaders' animosity towards God's Son was not outside the sovereign plan of our great salvation.

JUDAS ISCARIOT'S TREACHERY

Even while Judas was present at the Last Supper, "*Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly"* (John 13:27), and so Judas left to arrange for Jesus's arrest. Jesus had already quoted Psalm 41:9 regarding the actions of Judas – "*Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me*" (cf John 13:18) – written almost a thousand years earlier. Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen that Thursday night, and told His disciples: "*the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!*" (Luke 22:22). Judas's treachery was clearly part of God's plan for our great salvation.

THE DISCIPLES' DISLOYALTY

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of our Lord's suffering was that, in the Garden of Gethsemane, just as Jesus had predicted, "*You will all fall away because of me this night... Then all the disciples left him and fled.*" (Matt 26:31,56) That this too had a place in God's sovereign plan of salvation is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Jesus quoted from a five-hundred year old prophecy: "*Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me,*" declares the LORD of hosts. "*Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered!*" (Zech 13:7). As Jesus noted, "*all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled,*" (Matt 26:56)

THE TRIAL'S ILLEGALITY

It was illegal in the Roman Empire to hold a trial in a private residence, yet we are told that the troop sent by the Sanhedrin to arrest Jesus "*seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house*" (Luke 22:54); trials were only legal if held in public. It was also illegal because "*it was night*" (John 13:30), and witnesses were not allowed to be called at night! Furthermore, it was surely a travesty of justice that the prosecutors and jury were one and the same, and that the verdict had been reached before the trial began: "*the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death.*" (Matt 26:59) The sentence of death had already been passed! Even so, the illegality of Jesus trial was included in the sovereign plan of "*such a great salvation*".

THE GOVERNMENT'S COMPLICITY

Two rulers of the day were intimately involved in Jesus trial. *“When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.”* (Matt 27:1,2) Pilate did his best to off-load any responsibility and *“sent him over to Herod”* – that is, Herod Antipas, who reigned 4 BC–AD 39 – who *“with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate.”* (Luke 23:11,12) So that ploy did not work!

Even so, Pilate desperately wanted to release Jesus and admitted, *“I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him.”* (Luke 23:14,15) Pilate kept seeking a way *“to release him”* until *“the Jews cried out, ‘If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.’”* That was the point at which Pilate decided Jesus would have to die, and *“So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.”* (John 19:12–16)

Members of the early church were absolutely clear that government complicity had been sovereignly included in the trials and crucifixion of the Saviour. At a prayer meeting soon after Pentecost, they confidently stated this by quoting from Psalm 2: *“our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ – for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”* (Acts 4:25–28)

This whole catalogue of evil and wickedness was entirely in compliance with the sovereign plan of God. But this does raise a very important question: why did the Triune God, back in eternity, decide that all this was necessary? I am not sure we are given a direct Scriptural answer, but my suggestion is that it powerfully demonstrates why the sacrifice of God's Son needed to happen.

That the sovereign plan for our great salvation included all this wickedness of rejecting and killing the Son of God makes it absolutely clear to the world the awful depths of the depravity of fallen human nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that such wickedness incurs the Father's righteous justice: *“because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.”* (Rom 2:5) If humanity were ever to be redeemed, it was vital that the wrath of the holy God should be removed and His justice fully satisfied. Praise Him that this was all done *“by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith... so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”* (Rom 3:24–26)

OUR VULNERABILITY

The danger for us, in considering all this, is to think of ourselves as being less evil and wicked than those involved at the time. There are serious lessons for us to learn, and we all need to:

1. **Beware of Self-Confidence** Just before the shameful disloyalty of the disciples, Peter protested *“emphatically, ‘If I must die with you, I will not deny you.’ And they all said the same.”* (Mark 14:31) So easily we can be far too sure of ourselves and think that nothing will ever cause us to desert the Lord and renounce our faith in Him!
2. **Beware of Self-Interest** This was certainly uppermost in King Herod's mind when he became aware of the enquiry of the Magi, *“saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?’ ... When Herod heard this he was troubled”* (Matt 2:1–3). There was no way he was going to countenance a potential rival to his position. We, also, can be too protective of our interests, rather than trust our circumstances to our Sovereign Lord.
Then, though Judas betrayed Jesus because *“Satan entered into him”* (John 13:27), I suggest this occurred because the devil was able to exploit the fact that Judas *“was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.”* (John 12:6). Judas's primary concern all along had been to enrich himself, and he was prepared even to betray the Lord in order to line his pockets. So he asked the chief priests. *“‘What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?’ And they paid him thirty pieces of silver.”* (Matt 26:15) We might also readily betray the Lord if we are faced with a threat to our prosperity or status, or if a good opportunity is presented to us to better ourselves in some way.
3. **Beware of Self-Deception** The Jewish leaders were convinced that they were especially favoured by God and had the only accurate understanding of the Scriptures. Yet Jesus told them, *“you do not have his [God the Father's] word abiding in you”* (John 5:38). Church history, up to the present time, is marked with the accounts of people who have twisted the Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16). We must never think that we are immune from misunderstanding the Word of God and being led astray. We always need to allow God's Word to challenge our perceptions of what is true.
4. **Beware of Self-Defence** When faced with the threat of Caesar's displeasure, Pilate chose to protect his present position. He was not prepared to do what he knew to be right and trust his future to the Lord; he would not risk the danger of being deposed as governor, with all the possible consequences of that. We may regularly face temptation to be less than honest about our beliefs if our promotion prospects, salaries, reputation etc., might be threatened.

We can easily look back on those who forsook and ill-treated our Saviour with a critical eye and yet be utterly unaware of our own vulnerability when faced with similar temptations. So let's praise God that He did not allow any wickedness of men to stand in the way of providing *“such a great salvation”*, and let's keep on trusting our Lord and Saviour.