

The Murder of Jesus

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Recent years have seen an unprecedented interest in the inner workings of America's justice system. Not so long ago, the notion of bringing live television cameras inside the courtroom was highly controversial. Now we have Court TV, an entire cable channel devoted to nothing but courtroom cameras and criminal justice.

Or sometimes *injustice*. Even before the advent of cameras in the courtroom, it was clear that the finest courts of earthly jurisprudence sometimes convict the innocent or exonerate the guilty. Take, for example, the case of Randall Dale Adams, who was convicted and sentenced to death in 1977 for the murder of a Texas policeman. A 1988 documentary, "The Thin Blue Line," raised troubling questions about police handling of his case and helped win him a new trial just hours before his scheduled execution that year. In 1989 he was released from prison when the prosecutor in the case dismissed all charges against him, acknowledging the lack of any real evidence to convict him. An even more disturbing case was that of Kirk Bloodsworth, sentenced to death for rape and murder in the 1980s. After nearly a decade on death row, Bloodsworth was released in 1994 when sophisticated DNA tests proved beyond question that he was innocent of the crimes for which he had been condemned to death.

We're rightly appalled and outraged by such cases, and yet they do not appear to be diminishing. Nearly every week, it seems, some new, gross miscarriage of justice is dissected on "20/20," "60 Minutes," "48 hours," or a similar network news magazine. Americans' confidence in their criminal justice system may be at an all-time low.

Modern society's concern about justice gone awry is nothing new. Notorious cases of innocent victims who were wrongfully imprisoned or executed litter the pages of history, from the biblical account of Naboth, who was framed and executed by Ahab in ancient Israel, to the witchcraft trials of medieval history, right down to the present age. And on the other side of the ledger, history is filled with accounts of guilty people let off by courts of "justice," ranging from ancient aristocrats who routinely got away with murder, to modern organized-crime bosses who use bribery and intimidation to

manipulate the system.

Human courts have an uncanny knack for turning justice completely on its head. The wicked frequently prosper while the righteous suffer wrongfully.

Nowhere is that seen more graphically than in the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. No victim of injustice was ever more innocent than the sinless Son of God. And yet no one ever suffered more agony than He did. He was cruelly executed by men who openly acknowledged His faultlessness. Yet at the same time Barabbas, a murderous, thieving insurrectionist, was summarily set free. It was the greatest travesty of justice the world has ever seen.

Consider the facts: Jesus Christ was the only truly sinless individual who ever lived--the most innocent, blameless, virtuous man of all time. He "committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth" (2 Peter 2:22). He was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). And yet the torment and punishment He suffered in His death was infinitely more heinous than anyone else has ever suffered. He bore the full weight of retribution for human evil. He suffered as *if* He were guilty of humanity's worst offenses. And yet He was guilty of nothing.

It is easy to look at the cross and conclude it was the worst miscarriage of human justice in the history of the world. And it was. It was an evil act, perpetrated by the hands of wicked men.

But that is not the *full* story. The crucifixion of Christ was also the greatest act of divine justice ever carried out. It was done in full accord with "the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23)--and for the highest of purposes: the death of Christ secured the salvation of untold numbers and opened the way for God to forgive sin without compromising His own perfectly holy standard.

Christ was no mere victim of unjust men when He hung on the cross. Though murdered unjustly by men whose intentions were only evil, Christ died willingly, becoming an atonement for the sins of the unjust, just like the murderers who killed Him. It was the greatest sacrifice ever made; the purest act of love ever carried out; and ultimately an infinitely higher act of divine justice than all the human *in* justice it represented.

Every true Christian knows that Christ died for our sins. That truth is so rich that only eternity will reveal its full profundity. But in the mundane existence of our daily lives, we are too inclined to take the cross of Christ for granted. We mistakenly think of it as one of the elementary facts of our faith. We therefore neglect to meditate on this truth of all truths, and we miss the real richness of it. If we think of it at all, we tend to dabble too much in the shallow end of the pool, when we ought to be immersing ourselves in its depths daily.

Many wrongly think of Christ as merely a victim of human injustice, a martyr who suffered tragically and unnecessarily. But the truth is that His death was God's plan. In fact, it was the key to God's eternal plan of redemption. Far from being an unnecessary tragedy, the death of Christ was a glorious victory--the most gracious and wonderful act of divine benevolence ever rendered on behalf of sinners. It is the consummate expression of God's love for us.

Yet here also we see the wrath of God against sin. What is too often missed in all our songs and sermons about the cross is that it was the outpouring of divine judgment against the person of Christ--not because *He* deserved that judgment, but because He willingly took it upon Himself on behalf of those He would redeem. In the words of Isaac Watts,

Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,

Or thorns compose so rich a crown?"

Christ's death is by far the most important event in human history. It is the focal point of the Christian faith. It will be our one refuge in the final judgment. It ought to be the main sanctuary for every believer's private meditation. All our most precious hopes stem from the cross of Christ, and our highest thoughts should be rooted there. It is a subject we can ill afford to neglect or treat lightly. It is the shame of the modern church that our focus is so often fixed elsewhere.

May we never take the cross of Christ for granted or miss its depth. It was there that mercy and truth met together; righteousness and peace kissed each other (Psalm 85:10).

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