

## CHAPTER SIX

### A LOVE STRONGER THAN DEATH

*Jesus' Passion and Death* (Matthew 26:14—27: 66)

#### WHAT'S THE EXPERIENCE OF THE STORY?

##### **Setting the Scene**

The conflict between Jesus and the authorities reaches the boiling point in Jerusalem during the feast of Passover. The long-brewing storm now strikes with full force. Powerful forces collide: good and evil, love and betrayal, suffering and death.

As the story unfolds, Jesus experiences one moment of truth after another. Each one demands a choice and carries serious consequences. In Gethsemane fear drives faith to the breaking point. In that moment of truth Jesus surrenders to the will of the Father, Judas betrays him with a kiss, and the disciples flee in fear. When Jesus appears before Pilate, integrity and truth hang in the balance. Jesus stays faithful to his mission even when the cost is death. Pilate, by contrast, makes an expedient compromise in a cowardly attempt to salve his conscience and appease the crowd. Ultimately, Jesus gives his life in redemptive love—embracing the cross and staying faithful to death.

As we attempt to personalize the story of Jesus' passion and death, we follow him through his final hours. The story confronts us with the same choice that Jesus and the others faced. When we face the ultimate challenge, will we be able to embrace the cross in love?

##### **Reading the Gospel**

Read Matthew's account of Jesus' passion and death: Matthew 26:14—27:66.

### **Retelling the Story**

Matthew's account of Jesus' passion begins with the disciples asking Jesus where he wants them to prepare the Passover (v. 17). For Matthew's Jewish audience Passover immediately establishes the themes of sacrificial death, deliverance and covenant. The first Passover in Egypt—and every one since—involved offering a lamb during a sacrificial meal. This time Jesus is the lamb of sacrifice. The first Passover delivered the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt, and now Jesus delivers humankind from its slavery to sin. The first Passover initiated a covenant between God and Israel sealed in blood, and now Jesus seals a new covenant by pouring out his own blood on the cross.

In the face of betrayal and death, Jesus takes the bread, blesses it and gives it to his disciples. He is carrying out the Passover ritual until he transforms its meaning: "Take, eat; this is my body" (v. 26). Jesus builds on the richness of the Passover and redefines it with his own sacrifice. "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (vv. 27–28). Jesus freely lays down his life in redemptive love; the new covenant is sealed with the blood of that sacrifice.

Jesus enters Gethsemane painfully aware of how alone he is. Judas will betray him, the disciples will abandon him, and Peter—for all his talk—will repeatedly deny him. In his aloneness Jesus turns to God in prayer. He asks most of the disciples to stay at a distance, and only Peter, James and John accompany him. Overcome with sadness, he speaks openly about it with the three: "I am deeply grieved, even to death" (v. 38). Jesus asks them to "remain here, and stay awake with me" (v. 38). Going off by himself, he falls on his face in prayerful surrender. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (v. 39).

When Jesus returns to his three closest disciples, they are asleep. He admonishes Peter: "So, could you not stay awake with me one

hour?" (v. 40). His words provide powerful insight about the role of prayer in times of trial. "Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak" (v. 41).

This sequence of events repeats itself three times. Each time Jesus returns, the disciples are asleep. When he returns the third time, he knows his betrayer is arriving. "See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners" (v. 45). He rouses his disciples: "Get up. Let us be going" (v. 46).

Judas arrives with an armed crowd. He approaches Jesus, greets him and in a bitter irony betrays him with a kiss. Jesus surrenders, but one of the disciples is determined to go down fighting. He draws his sword, strikes a servant and severs his ear. Jesus stops him: "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (v. 52). Jesus makes clear that he could summon legions of angels to rescue him but will not because "how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" (v. 54). God will not make a diving catch to save Jesus from the forces of evil and the finality of death. Jesus is arrested, and the disciples flee into the night.

Jesus is led off to the high priest who has assembled his council, the Sanhedrin. One by one, witnesses come forward to testify against Jesus, but they fail to produce the evidence needed to put him to death. Through it all, Jesus remains silent. Finally, the high priest becomes frustrated and says to Jesus: "I put you under oath before the living God: tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God" (v. 63). Jesus now openly acknowledges his identity, knowing that by doing so he is surrendering his life.

But, I tell you,

From now on you will see the Son of Man  
 seated at the right hand of the Power  
 and coming on the clouds of heaven. (v. 64)

Interpreting Jesus' revelation of his true identity as blasphemy, the high priest tears his clothes, saying: "He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses?" (v. 65). He asks the members of the council for their opinion, and their answer is clear: "He deserves death" (v. 66).

Peter has followed Jesus at a distance. While Jesus is with the Sanhedrin, Peter is waiting in the courtyard with the servants, hoping to find out what happens. He is very much alone, and fear is getting the best of him. First a servant girl confronts him: "You also were with Jesus the Galilean" (v. 69). Peter denies it in front of all the servants: "I do not know what you are talking about" (v. 70). He is then confronted by a second servant girl, and later by other bystanders. With each accusation his denial gets stronger. Finally, he calls down curses on himself and swears: "I do not know the man!" (v. 74). As the cock crows, Peter remembers that Jesus predicted his denial. He goes out and weeps bitterly.

Peter is not the only one feeling remorse. When Judas finds out that Jesus has been condemned to death, he attempts to return the thirty pieces of silver to the authorities. "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (27:4). Judas throws the silver into the sanctuary and hangs himself in despair.

When Jesus is brought before Pilate, there's a new spin on the charges against him. The Sanhedrin has already found him guilty of blasphemy, but has no authority to issue the death sentence. As governor, Pilate has little interest in religious disputes, so blasphemy means nothing to him. When Jesus is arraigned before Pilate, he is accused of treason for claiming to be the king of the Jews. Treason is a charge that gets the governor's attention, something he can punish with death. If Jesus had been executed for blasphemy, he would have been stoned. Treason has a higher price: crucifixion.

Jesus isn't the first person Pilate has tried for treason. He governs a volatile territory where various factions advocate the overthrow of Rome. Pilate comes to the trial experienced in dealing

with revolutionaries, and he expects to dispatch the matter quickly. From the first moment, however, Pilate's encounter with Jesus is anything but routine. In Pilate's experience revolutionaries come in two sizes. Most are "little ones" who lose their bravado as soon as they are arrested. By the time they appear before him, they grovel in an attempt to make any deal that will spare their miserable lives. A few "big ones" remain defiant, at least until the beatings start. Both sizes are sentenced quickly and without incident.

To Pilate's surprise, Jesus doesn't fit either mold. What first gets Pilate's attention is Jesus' composure. It's more than a steeled will refusing to let a volcano of emotion erupt. It's deeper than a resignation to his fate. What Pilate senses—whether he can name it or not—is the inner peace that Jesus possesses. There's something more, too. Pilate sees in Jesus' eyes something he has never before seen in the eyes of an accused man: a forgiving love. Ironically, it is the depth of Jesus' composure that most unnerves Pilate. As he confronts the deep calm of Jesus' love, he is shaken to the core.

Integrity hangs in the balance during Pilate's encounter with Jesus. The accused stays true to his identity, willing to pay the ransom evil demands. Jesus refuses to deny his relationship with God or compromise his mission in order to save his skin. The judge, by contrast, is caught between the rock of his conscience and the hard place of a demanding crowd. Pilate is a crafty survivor, and he pushes against the rock trying to find an expedient solution. First, he attempts to use a custom of the festival to release Jesus, but he misreads the crowd. They want Barabbas, a notorious criminal imprisoned with rioters who committed murder during an uprising. The first outcome of Pilate's expedience is ironic: He continues to try a man who he believes is innocent while trying to appease the crowd by releasing a known insurrectionist.

The situation continues to deteriorate. Jesus is caught in the middle of a bargaining session between Pilate and the crowd. Integrity was the first casualty, and now responsibility becomes the second. Pilate is the only one with the authority to pronounce sentence on Jesus, yet he attempts to blame the crowd for the outcome. His public hand washing is a dramatic portrayal of refusing to accept responsibility and looking for someone to blame.

Hours of unspeakable torture and suffering follow, leading to Jesus' death. In addition to scourging Jesus, the soldiers strip him of his clothes and crown him with thorns. Finally, they dress him in his own clothes and lead him off to crucifixion. As Jesus drags his cross toward Golgotha, the soldiers get impatient. They want to get this thing over with as quickly as possible, and Jesus is slow and stumbling. One of them scans the crowd and—who knows why—his eyes land on Simon of Cyrene. It's doubtful he volunteered for the assignment. As the crowd passed, he probably edged forward to get a glimpse of what was happening. The next thing he knows, the soldiers are forcing him to carry someone else's cross.

When they reach Golgotha, the soldiers crucify Jesus, placing the charge against him over his head: "This is Jesus, King of the Jews" (v. 37). As Jesus' torn and broken body hangs from the cross, darkness covers the earth. He experiences a death of unspeakable pain. He tastes the death of being alone—abandoned by his followers and deserted by his friends. He touches the death of doubt and uncertainty, wondering whether his mission will succeed and whether his followers will carry on without him. He feels the death of waiting, one breath at a time, not knowing how many are left. As Jesus hangs from the cross, he sees his lifeblood is draining away and knows that death is near. Through it all, his love never falters.

Near the end Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 46). These are not words of despair; they are the

opening words of Psalm 22. Jesus' prayer from the cross is a psalm expressing his confidence that God never fails to deliver those in distress. Finally, he cries out in a loud voice and gives up his spirit.

At the moment of Jesus' death, the centurion and the other soldiers guarding Jesus witness all that is taking place, and they are terrified. Their fear moves them to belief, and they exclaim, "Truly, this was God's Son" (v. 54). The women who "had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him" (v. 55) watch all this from a distance. In the evening Joseph of Arimathaea goes to Pilate and requests Jesus' body. He wraps it in a shroud, puts it in his own new tomb and rolls a stone across the entrance. "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb" (v. 61).

### **HOW DOES THE STORY TOUCH ME?**

As I reflect on how the story of Jesus' passion and death touches my life, here are some of the ways that I connect with the experience of the story.

#### **Gethsemane: Faith at the Breaking Point**

Jesus' experience in Gethsemane demonstrates how fear pushes faith to the breaking point. In the garden he confronts his fear of suffering and death. The cost of surrendering to the Father's will is clear, and he chooses to pay the price. Because his trust in God is stronger than his fear of death, Jesus chooses to stay faithful to God and true to his mission even when the price of fidelity is suffering and death.

In Gethsemane fear also pushes the disciples' faith to the breaking point. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. In contrast to Jesus, their fear proves stronger than their faith. They abandon Jesus and flee to save their skins. Even Peter—the one so sure of his courage—repeatedly denies Jesus, swearing an oath that he doesn't know him. As we personalize the story of Jesus' passion and death,

we come face to face with the Gethsemanes in our own lives, those times when fear pushes our faith to the breaking point.

Steven Spielberg's movie *Saving Private Ryan*<sup>1</sup> is based on the true story of U.S. Army Rangers behind enemy lines in World War II. Their mission is to find a soldier whose three brothers have all been killed in action and return him home safely. They display amazing courage and resourcefulness in carrying out their mission. By contrast, in a crucial battle, we see the agonizing struggle of Corporal Upham (played by Jeremy Davies)—a young soldier completely immobilized by fear. His spirit may be willing, but his flesh is weak. Like the disciples in Gethsemane, he hides from the action in order to save his skin. His failure to deliver ammunition to those under fire results in the death of two other soldiers.

Several years ago I signed up for what I thought would be a nice weekend of personal growth. Unexpectedly, it landed me in Gethsemane face to face with my fear. Like the soldier Spielberg portrays, I found myself paralyzed. Ironically, it wasn't in the heat of battle, it was in the process of trying to build community.

After reading the book *A Different Drum*<sup>2</sup> by M. Scott Peck, I decided to attend a weekend of community building led by facilitators from the Foundation for Community Encouragement. A group of approximately twenty-five people—almost all of us strangers to one another—gathered at a retreat house in Northern Michigan. Our goal was to build community during a two-day experience. I was hoping to both experience community and learn something about how to build it.

The weekend began simply enough—each of us talking about why we came and what we hoped to gain from the experience. But, as you'd expect, the road from twenty-five strangers to being a community had a few potholes in it. To be honest about it, for me one of those potholes was the approximate size of the Grand Canyon. As

we attempted to become a community, our various expectations and agendas begin to collide. Peck refers to this as “chaos,” and I’d say it’s a pretty good description—both of what was going on in the group and what was happening in my stomach. Trying to move beyond chaos is what put me in Gethsemane.

According to Peck, there are only two ways that a group can move beyond chaos. One way is to try to “get organized” and attempt to manage the chaos. Unfortunately, getting organized prevents the group from becoming a community. My head did a good job of coaching me not to fall into the trap of trying to get organized. All right, if I’m really honest, I did offer a suggestion or two. But I didn’t push too hard. My Gethsemane dilemma had to do with the other option.

Peck describes the other way to move beyond chaos as *emptying*. Emptying is the only path toward community. I was clear enough about emptying in my head; I’m sure I could have given the book report. Unfortunately, the group I was with didn’t seem too interested in a book report. They were expressing intense feelings: hurt, anger, grief—the whole rainbow of emotion and vulnerability. I had some of these feelings too. It’s just that I was trying to have them without anyone noticing it. I was hoping to have my chaos in private, while I helped other people deal with theirs.

In Gethsemane Jesus trusts God enough to empty himself. He moves beyond his fear, lets go of his own agenda, opens himself to whatever comes and surrenders to God. What I did that weekend was let my fear get the best of me. I pretty much flunked “Emptying 101.” I flunked it the same way the disciples did—by running away. My body never left the room, but I had an out-of-body experience. Mentally and emotionally, I got out of Dodge.

By the time the weekend concluded, many of the people had experienced community. For my part, I had seen something of what it takes to build community, but my inability to act in the face of my