

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples,² “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas,⁴ and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him.⁵ “But not during the Feast,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.” (Matthew 26:1-5 NIV 1984)

Not During the Feast

Timing is everything. That’s true in many areas of our lives. Have you ever seen one of those public marriage proposals? You know, at a football game or wherever, the guy proposes in front of everybody and they even show it on TV. If you’re going to do it that publicly, you’d better wait until you’re sure what the answer is going to be. Several years ago, at a Houston Rockets basketball game, a guy got down on one knee on the court at halftime and proposed. While they were showing it, the TV announcers were joking about how just once they’d like to see the girl say no – and she did. She ran off the court and left him kneeling there while the announcer had to blather on about how he was just joking. When and how you propose, matters. If you do it too soon or in the wrong way, you might ruin a relationship that could have become a marriage. Tonight’s example of irony from the passion is all about timing. It can be summed up in one simple statement that the religious leaders of Israel agreed on, a statement of when they wanted to kill Jesus: **Not during the feast.**

I.

‘The feast,’ of course, is the Passover. It was the most important festival of the year and it was followed by a weeklong celebration known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread. During the Passover, Jewish pilgrims flooded Jerusalem. This was just two days before the Passover, so Tuesday of Holy Week. Those pilgrims were already streaming in. You could feel the holiday excitement in the air. Jesus’ most committed enemies agreed: **not during the feast! It was the one time they didn’t want to kill Jesus.**

Matthew sets up the irony for us so well that it’s almost overstatement to point it out. On that Tuesday, two groups of people were meeting. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus sat down with his disciples. In the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest, the chief priests and the elders of the people were meeting. What were these Jewish leaders doing? Matthew says, **“They plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him.”** The leaders of the Jewish nation, the men charged with both justice and religious purity, hated Jesus so much that they were plotting to kill him. They wanted to do it in some sly, some secret, some treacherous way. They wanted to make sure that they wouldn’t be blamed for it. How’s that for irony?

So they reached consensus on one important issue: not during the feast. The Bible doesn’t even tell us who said these words, because it didn’t matter. They all recognized the wisdom of this statement. It would be so much easier to deal with Jesus after the Passover was over. The crowds would go home. Jerusalem would once again become a relatively sleepy, provincial capital and they could do whatever they wanted to Jesus. But not during the feast. That was the one time that they didn’t want to kill Jesus.

What a contrast to what Jesus was doing. He and his disciples had already had a full day. They had been to the temple and Jesus had confronted his enemies and won every argument with them. Then, he and his disciples had walked out of the city to the Mount of Olives and there, Jesus had taught them about his return. Then he spoke these crucial words: **“As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”** It didn’t matter what the chief priests and the elders were plotting. Jesus’ time had come. In two days, on the very day of the Passover, he would be arrested so that he could be crucified. At the one time his enemies did not want to do it, they would kill him.

There would be nothing secret or sly about it. He wasn’t going to be stabbed in the back by an assassin. He wasn’t going to just disappear. He was going to be crucified. By definition, that was a public act. First of all, it would have to be done by the Romans, because the Jewish leadership did not have authority to carry out executions. That would require a legal proceeding. Crucifixion involved tying or nailing the victim to a post and letting him hang, sometimes for days, until he died. It took an open space. Guards had to watch over the

prisoner until he died. In Jerusalem, it meant that you had to march that prisoner through the city and outside to Calvary, where executions took place.

Nothing about Jesus' death was what the Jewish leaders expected. What lesson are we to learn from this irony of the passion? Who was really in charge. The leaders of the Jews were convinced that they had matters under control. Even though the Romans were ruling the land, they pretty much had Pontius Pilate wrapped around their little finger. They controlled the temple and through it, the people. They were convinced they could make this happen the way they wanted it to. But God had other ideas. God had chosen the Passover as the day when his Son would be arrested and die¹ because God had given them the Passover as a prophecy of Christ. He wanted Jerusalem to be filled to overflowing on the day his Son died because God wanted his people to see the fulfillment of all that he had been promising for 1500 years.

Jesus' whole ministry was aimed at this final trip to Jerusalem. So, even though these men agreed, "Not during the feast," these very men paid Judas to betray him. These very men sent the temple guards to Gethsemane with Judas on the night of the Passover to arrest him. These men gathered false witnesses in the middle of that night and held a kangaroo court and convicted Jesus of blasphemy. These men brought him to Pilate and demanded that he die. These men convinced the people to ask for Barabbas instead of Jesus when Pilate wanted to let him go. These men walked back and forth in front of his cross taunting him.

These men did all that because God's plan could not be stopped. God's love demanded that he give himself to pay for all sins – even for the sins of these men. So when these men least wanted to kill Jesus, God made them fulfill the plan he had conceived of before the world began. And God did all that for us. He saw you and me before he said, "Let there be light!" He controlled everything so that it all happened exactly the way it was supposed to. He even used these men to bring Jesus' mission to completion so we will live.

II.

The Jewish leaders played into God's hands. Now, obviously, when God decides that he's going to make something happen, it's going to happen. But how we become his tools matters. Do we serve him out of faith or in spite of our unbelief? What made these men serve God's plan? Their own sinful pride. You see that in the rationale for their decision: **not during the feast! It was the one time that what they feared most could happen.**

What did they fear most? Losing their position. That's why they hated Jesus. He was too popular. From the very beginning, they worried that he was undercutting their position. That same fear drove this decision to wait. They said, "**But not during the Feast, or there may be a riot among the people,**" because of all those pilgrims who were filling Jerusalem. Riots are destructive. People get hurt, even killed. Buildings get burned down. Property gets looted. But that's not what these men were worried about. They ruled Israel because the Romans let them. The Romans figured that, as long as these guys collected taxes and kept the people in line, it was cheaper and easier to let them take care of local matters. But if they couldn't handle the job, the Romans would find someone else to do it. That was their big fear. They liked being in charge.

Sinful pride drove them to plot murder. Obviously, you and I don't share their hatred of the Savior. But can we honestly claim to be any better? Their problem is our problem, too. Sinful pride is the heart of all sin. It takes many different forms, but in the end, sinful pride says that I am the most important person on earth. What I want should matter more than what other people want – even more important than what God wants. Now, my guess is that not many of us would say it that way, but isn't that the way we act? When we throw temper tantrums – and adults can throw pretty good temper tantrums – isn't that the same thing? When we hold grudges, when we replay in our minds over and over again the things that people have said and done to us, isn't that sinful pride? When we wallow in despair and are convinced that our sins are so bad that God could never love us, that's sinful pride, too. It's saying that what Jesus did on the cross isn't good enough to cover *my* sin.

God calls us to be humble, to put him first, to serve him and serve our neighbor. God calls us to sacrifice for our spouses and our children and for strangers who still need to hear the gospel. God calls us to be pure in heart and in mind, as well as in word and action. Sinful pride always finds a reason to rebel against God. Every sin is born in pride – in what I want, instead of what God wants. Even if we actually succeed in hiding that

¹ Just in case someone challenges you on this statement, remember that the Jewish Passover began at sundown on Thursday and ended at sundown on Friday.

pride from every other human being, God still sees it. That sinful pride in our hearts and displayed in our lives earns death and hell. That's what every single one of us deserves.

But that's why God made sure that his Son died on the very day these men didn't want him to. Jesus was dying for us. And it was no accident that he died on a cross. The Romans had other ways of executing criminals. They reserved crucifixion for traitors and for rebels. Certainly, part of that was the horrible pain involved. But you know what? Nowhere does the Bible dwell on the pain of the cross. It dwells on the shame. To the Romans, the cross said that you were the lowest kind of criminal, unworthy of any kind of honor in death. To the Jews, the cross was even worse. God had said, "**Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.**" And when God says "curse," he doesn't mean the evil eye or casting spells or anything like that. God's curse is when he damns someone to hell. To the Jews, being hung on the cross symbolized being abandoned to hell.

So Jesus said that he would be crucified. He would be abandoned to hell itself on the cross. His Father would serve up to him all the shame and scorn that we sinners should get from a holy God for daring to trot out our sinful pride and follow it instead of him. God should pour that shame and scorn out on us in hell. But he won't. Because Jesus didn't suffer just one man's scorn and shame and hell; he suffered all the scorn, all the shame, all the hell of every sinner who will ever live. Then he died for us all. And then he rose. When he rose, he said that all the scorn and the shame, all the death and the hell, are over. We are free. We are loved. We will live with him forever.

Timing is everything. These men wanted to kill Jesus, just not that week. And when it didn't go the way they planned, they still celebrated getting rid of him. They probably even counted themselves lucky that there was no riot. Irony is a set of circumstances or an outcome that is contrary to what you might expect. They might have seen irony in the foolishness of the fears. But that's not the real irony here. The real irony is that God used their hatred and their opposition to bring our Savior to the cross at exactly the moment he planned so that Jesus could fulfill his mission and win eternal life for us. Give thanks for that irony. Amen.