

### *The Conspiracy against Jesus*

It has to be said that the railroading and condemning of Jesus was an evil plot by people who were prisoners of their own pride and position. The irony is that Jesus came to free just such people. Jesus announced his mission as being “to proclaim freedom for the prisoners . . . to set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18 NIV). He came *especially* to free those held captive by pride and power, and those oppressed by spiritual blindness. The *spiritual* captivity that we create for ourselves is the worst confinement. The most heartbreaking of all oppression is our own narrow-mindedness and judgmentalism. The hardest prison to escape is our own mental subjugation to dogmas that we think cannot be questioned. But Jesus is the greatest jailbreaker of all time. If only the Sadducees and Pharisees had *wanted* that freedom! If only they could have seen how *bound* they were by their love of power, their pride of position, their judgmental thinking!

Jesus truly suffered. He endured the heartbreak of seeing these people harden their hearts, and he knew they were going to kill him. But he did not *have* to be murdered! That is, *God* did not intend it, and several of Jesus’ parables show that. In the parable of the tenant farmers, we always seem to miss one key line near the beginning. The vineyard owner sends his servants to the tenants farmers, and then sends his Son in order “to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard” (Mark 12:2). In the NIV, this is “to collect from them some of the fruit.” The vineyard owner just wants some “fruit.” He is not sending his son to be killed—which would be a strange thing for a father to do! Rather, he expected the son to be respected (12:6). The owner is horrified when his Son is killed. He wants only *growth* in his vineyard, not violence, and certainly not a sacrificial murder.

“Fruit” is Jesus’ favorite metaphor for spiritual progress. Numerous times he uses the image of plants growing to signify spiritual growth (Matt 7:16–20; 21:43; Mark 4:20, 28; Luke

6:44). “A mustard seed. . . when it is sown it grows up” (Mark 4:31–32); “the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine” (John 15:4); “every good tree bears good fruit” (Matt 7:17). I must say it again: In the vineyard parable, Jesus says that God’s Son is sent to collect some fruit, that is, to observe and encourage spiritual *growth*. Jesus did not come to earth in order to be murdered or to pay some horrible price. This parable is totally inconsistent with the idea that the Son was sent in order to be offered up as a sacrifice or a payment for human sin.

Jesus came to foster and support spiritual growth. He is all about living and bearing fruit. That is what *God* is all about, too!—*growth*, not punishment. Growth is a fundamental point throughout Jesus’ teaching. It is treated as something natural and desirable: “The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (Mark 4:28). We provide the conditions for spiritual growth, but God fertilizes the seed and causes the growth: “the seed would sprout and grow, [the farmer] does not know how” (Mark 4:27). This parable in Mark perfectly pictures the wonderful paradox of growth: we are like farmers who need to prepare the soil, yet the actual growth is God’s doing, not our own. Spiritual growth is completely unconscious, and follows certain stages of progress that are not determined by us.

Jesus’ life mission was to embody and to teach the love, goodness, and beauty of God. His purpose was not to bargain with or to persuade God in any way, but to lead us closer to a loving God. The Father already wants to give what is best for all the children. As the Epistle of James confirms: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights” (James 1:17 NIV).

It is not God but sinful human beings who killed the Son of Man. The priests (Sadducees) desired the death of the one by whom they felt threatened, and they persuaded a cowardly Roman official to carry it out. It was not God’s desire that this happen. Jesus mourns for Jerusalem, “you who kill the prophets . . . how often I have longed to gather your children

together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Luke 13:34 NIV). This shows that the killing was not God’s will. Jesus *would* have gathered the whole Jewish people with him in a spiritual mission, but the jealous leaders would not allow it. Instead, they killed another prophet.

Many Christians have thought of the killing of Jesus as inevitable, necessary, and even desirable (thus, “Good” Friday), but Jesus’ own attitude is more sensible; he does not blame the Father for this act of violence. If Jesus thought his killing was planned by God, it would make no sense for him to *weep* over Jerusalem’s unwillingness to comprehend or to recognize the time of God’s visitation (Luke 19:41–44). He expresses real sorrow over the spiritual failure of Jerusalem’s leaders. He feels sorrow for the people who are going to get him killed. They could have chosen to respond differently.

Once the Sadducees had put their plan into motion, Jesus recognizes that his killing is inevitable, and he warns the apostles of his coming death (Matt 16:21–26; 17:22; 20:17–19), but he says nothing about it being sacrificial or substitutionary in any way. There are nine of these passages, three in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and all of them are matter-of-fact warnings to his apostles about the coming tragedy. Jesus is trying to prepare the apostles for the tests they will face. He wants to forestall the grief and fear that might overwhelm them. He is *always* thinking about others, and here he is concerned about these men. In none of the nine passages does Jesus say anything about his coming death as a sacrifice. “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes . . . The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him” (Mark 8:31; 9:31). These are statements about human violence, not about God’s will. He anticipates his coming death, but does not speak of it as a sacrifice.

Luke the evangelist believes that the Messiah had to be put to death to fulfill what was written (Luke 22:22; 24:26–27), but the emphasis is on the predictive role of Scripture and on God’s foresight, rather than on any *interpretation* of the death (as a sacrifice, a payment, etc.).

The death became *humanly* unavoidable once some powerful people conspire to kill him. One theologian asks what would happen if someone who lived wholly by love “entered hostile territory ruled by violence and domination? . . . If he kept on living by self-giving, non-violent love, death’s antithesis, that person would finally be killed.”<sup>1</sup> So the fault is clearly that of the evildoers. Unfortunately, many people misplace the blame for the crucifixion, and then theologize upon the basis of human evildoing. Whenever people make salvation dependent on the cross, they have (probably unconsciously) made *God to blame* for the crucifixion. Let us not blame God for what *people* have done. Let us not be misled by a dreary sacrificial logic into thinking that God required sacrifice before God would forgive!

Rather, we need to recognize that good people are *often* made the target of violence, and what happened to Jesus is what has happened to many reformers, non-conformists, and prophets. “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town” (Luke 4:24). “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house” (Matt 13:57). All whistleblowers are resisted by the authorities. Every courageous thinker is resented by his or her family. The creative artist is sneered at, at home. In *our* lives, this is what is meant by a prophet not being honored in the prophet’s own country. It is a tragic phenomenon in human society, caused by people’s hostility to reform, fear of change, and resistance to truth.

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<sup>1</sup> Finger, “*Christus Victor* as Nonviolent Atonement,” 99.