

**+ Matthew 26:1-5 + Ironies of the Passion: Not During the Feast!¹ +
+ 1st Sunday in Lent + 14 February 2016 +**

Timing is everything. That's true in many areas of our lives. For example, have you ever seen one of those public marriage proposals at a sporting event? A guy uses the scoreboard to get his girlfriend's attention and then he proposes in front of everybody. Maybe it's even shown on TV. Now if you're going to do something like that publicly, you'd better be sure what the answer is going to be or the answer may not be the one you want.

Some years ago at halftime of an NBA basketball game, a guy got down on one knee on the court and proposed to his girlfriend. The TV announcers joked how they'd like to see the girl say no just once...but then she did! She ran off the court and left the guy kneeling there. Timing mattered for that proposal and his poor timing led to poor results.

Timing is everything. The same was true with the events surrounding Jesus' suffering and death. This Lenten season we're looking at ironies of Jesus' Passion and tonight we see the irony of when Jesus' enemies wanted to kill him, but ***Not during the feast***. READ MATTHEW 26:1-5.

The ***"feast"*** was the Passover—the most important festival of the year, which was then followed by a week-long celebration known as the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Passover was only two days away, and Jewish pilgrims were flooding Jerusalem. You could feel the holiday excitement in the air, and ironically Jesus' enemies didn't want to disrupt the festival. It was the one time they *didn't* want to kill Jesus.

Matthew sets up the irony so well. Two groups were meeting at different places for different purposes. 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.

So what were those Jewish leaders doing? Matthew tells us, ***"They plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him."*** The leaders of the Jewish nation, who were responsible for justice and religious purity, hated Jesus so much that they actually plotted to kill him—to do it in some secret, treacherous way so they didn't have to take the blame. How's that for irony?

So they reached consensus on one important issue: ***not during the feast***. They all recognized the wisdom of that timing. 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. ***Not during the feast***, though. That was the one time they didn't want to kill Jesus.

What a contrast to what Jesus was doing. Jesus and his disciples had been to the temple. Jesus had confronted his enemies and won every argument with them. Then he and his disciples walked out to the Mount of Olives where 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 his enemies were plotting. Jesus' time had come. He would soon be arrested to be crucified, and his enemies would kill him—when they didn't want to do it.

There would be nothing secret about it. No assassin would stab him in the back. Instead Jesus was going to be crucified—a very public form of execution. The Romans would have to do it, because the Jews had no authority to execute anyone. It would then require a legal proceeding. Crucifixion involved nailing the victim to a wooden cross and letting him hang by his pierced hands until he died, so it required an open space and guards to watch over the prisoner until he died. In Jerusalem, the prisoner had to be marched through the city and out to Golgotha, where executions took place.

Nothing about Jesus' death was what the Jewish leaders expected or wanted. Do you see who was really in charge the entire time? The Jewish leaders were convinced that they were in control. Even though the Romans ruled the land, they basically had the governor, Pontius Pilate, wrapped around their little finger. They controlled the temple, and through it, the people. They were convinced that they controlled the timing of it all.

God, however, had other ideas. God had chosen the Passover as the day when his Son would be arrested and die, because God had given them the Passover as a prophecy of the Lamb of God. He wanted Jerusalem to be filled to overflowing on the day his Son died, because God wanted his people to see how he was fulfilling all he had promised over the centuries.

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Jesus' entire ministry was aimed at that final trip to Jerusalem. So even though these men agreed, **"Not during the feast,"** they were the ones who paid Judas to betray Jesus. These 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 the night, 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 the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus when Pilate wanted to let Jesus go. These men even walked back and forth in front of his cross taunting him.

These men did all of 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 devised before the world began.

Amazingly God did all that for us. He saw you and me before he even said, **"Let there be light!"** (Genesis 1:3) He guided everything so it happened exactly the way he intended. He even used these men to complete Jesus' mission for us!

When God decides that he's going to make something happen, it's going to happen. Yet how do we serve the Lord as his tools? Do we serve him out of faith or in spite of our unbelief? Jesus' enemies served God's plan out of sinful pride. We see that in the rationale for their decision: **not during the feast!** It was the one time that their greatest fear would actually 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 the decision to wait. All those pilgrims filling Jerusalem were a problem for Jesus' enemies.

That's why they said, **"But not during the Feast, or there may be a riot among the people."** Riots are destructive. People get hurt, even killed. Buildings get burned down. Property gets looted, but these men didn't worry about any of that. 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. If they couldn't handle the job, however, the Romans would find someone else to do it. The Jewish leaders feared losing their authority.

Sinful pride drove them to plot murder. Now 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 than what God wants.

Few, if any of us would say it that way, but isn't that the way we act sometimes? When you throw a temper tantrum—and adults can throw pretty good temper tantrums—isn't that the same thing? When you hold a grudge, when you replay in your mind over and over again the things that people have said and done to you, isn't that sinful pride? When you wallow in despair and are convinced that your sins are so bad that God could never love you, that's sinful pride too. It's like saying what Jesus did on the cross isn't good enough to cover *your* sin.

God calls you to be humble, to put him first, to serve him and your neighbor. God calls you to sacrifice for your spouse and your children and for strangers who need to hear the Gospel. God calls you to be pure in heart and mind, as well as in word and action. Sinful pride always finds a reason to rebel against God and his will. Even if you actually succeed in hiding that pride from every other person, God still sees it. That sinful pride in your heart and displayed in your life earns death and hell, which every one of us deserves.

That's why God made sure that his Son died on the very day these men didn't want. Jesus was dying for us. It was no accident that he died on a cross. The Romans had other ways of executing criminals, but they reserved crucifixion for traitors and rebels. To the Romans, the cross identified a person as 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."** (Deuteronomy 21:23b) God's curse is when he condemns someone to hell. To the Jews, being hung on the cross symbolized being abandoned to hell.

That's why Jesus said he would be crucified. He would be abandoned to the sufferings of hell on the cross. His Father would dump on him all the shame and scorn that we sinners should get from a holy God for daring to follow our sinful pride instead of him. God should pour all that shame and scorn on us in hell, but he won't. You see, Jesus didn't suffer just one person's scorn and shame and hell. On the cross he suffered all the scorn, all the shame, and all the hell of every single sinner who will ever live. Then he died for us and rose again.

Because he rose, all that scorn and shame and death and hell is over. You are free! You are loved. You will live with him!

Timing is everything. Jesus' enemies wanted to kill, just not that week. When it didn't go as planned, they still celebrated getting rid of him. They probably even counted themselves lucky that there was no riot. The real irony, though, is that God used their hatred and opposition to bring our Savior to the cross exactly when he planned so Jesus could fulfill his mission and win eternal life for us. Give thanks for that irony. Amen.