

GOD'S TERRIBLE PLAN FOR JESUS (Luke 18.31-34)

“God Loves You and Has a Wonderful Plan for Your Life.” This saying has become an evangelical “sacred cow” through the influence of a widely-distributed gospel tract.¹ This slogan, preached indiscriminately, is misleading at best and actually false for most people. We heard some students of a Reformed seminary once stood publicly with an evangelistic sign: “God *might* love you and have a wonderful plan for your life.” That probably generated some thoughtful discussion.

Biblical Predestination. The Bible teaches that God has decreed from eternity the ultimate salvation of all His chosen people, and only them (Rom 8.29-30; Eph 1.5, 11). This was according to the good pleasure of His will, as with all He does (Psa 115.3). Your destiny is solely in God’s hands, and only unfolding providence reveals it. God chooses some people to be vessels of mercy, and forms others to be vessels of wrath, both to His glory in different ways. Not man’s free will but God’s sovereign grace makes this distinction. We have no more right to question God about this than a clay pot, whether for noble or ignoble use, its maker (Rom 9.14-24).

So, maybe God does love you in a special way and have a wonderful plan for your life, or perhaps not. I shudder to say it, but you could be among the reprobate destined for hell. One thing is for sure. Your end is unalterably fixed by God’s pre-determination.²

A Wonderful Plan for You Required a Terrible Plan for Jesus. If you do have a well-founded assurance of salvation, then the popular saying is true about you, but only because God (dare we say it?) *hated and had a terrible plan for Jesus.* Of course from eternity the Son of God is uniquely His Beloved, but He came into the world with a terrible divine mission, an awful plan to endure God’s holy hatred against all the sinners for whom He died. At that moment God hated Jesus in our place. His cry on the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt 27.46), shows the reality of divine abandonment, but none of this was any surprise to Him. He did it on purpose.

Jesus deliberately pursued God’s terrible plan for His life.

By “terrible” we mean a plan shockingly and distressingly miserable, not one of inferior quality. It was the best of all possible plans, and yet it was also very terrible, because it required Jesus to suffer the equivalent

¹ “Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws” by Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ. To be fair, the original says God “offers a wonderful plan for your life,” but even that is worthy of criticism on biblical grounds.

² See 1689 LBCF III, “Of God’s Decree,” for an excellent statement and defense of the biblical doctrine.

of hell, and He deliberately pursued this! He ran, leaped, and plunged Himself into the gaping mouth of the lake of fire, that bottomless pit of horrible darkness, to spare you elect sinners the end you deserved! It is important for Christians to know this about Him, that we might love Him all the more and prepare for the trials that face us in God’s plan.

KNOWN BY JESUS (18.31a)

The “journey narrative” begins with Luke 9.51, a statement of Jesus’ resolution, at the right time, to go to Jerusalem for His humiliation and punishment, no small part of the reason He came into the world. Once they got to Jerusalem, Jesus was facing the beginning of the end.

Significance of Jerusalem. Their destination was uniquely the city of God. The Temple was there—the center of divinely-authorized worship, the place where countless atoning animal sacrifices were offered, the holy of holies where God’s glory appeared in the most exceptional way. Now after many centuries of waiting, the spiritual realities of these old religious shadows were about to be realized, because they pointed to Jesus and His death on the cross.

Spoken to Prepare His Disciples. “Then Jesus took unto him the twelve (“he took the twelve aside,” NKJV), and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem.” Jesus had been revealing to the twelve apostles (cf. 6.13), at first almost cryptically but now with increasingly gruesome detail, what He was facing (Luke 9.22, 43-44; 12.49-50; 13.32-33; 17.25). This passage is the most graphic yet.

Remember in this context that Peter, hearing Jesus challenge the rich young ruler, testified for the disciples, “We have left all and followed thee” (18.28), and Jesus commended them for their commitment (18.29-30). Now He tells them more of what God had in store, though for the time being it was lost on them. Doubtless Jesus was saying these things so that they would *later know that He knew beforehand* and realize more convincingly that He was the Messiah despite His humiliation (cf. John 13.19).

In the event, the disciples found it desperately difficult to come to terms with the cross; they would have found it impossible without this preparation . . . Only Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation and his gift of the Spirit would utterly clear their minds and answer their questions, but the careful groundwork Jesus here lays proved sufficiently strong to keep the disciples together. They did not scatter immediately after the crucifixion, but kept together until his resurrection fully vindicated him and established their faith (D. A. Carson, on John 13.19).

Spoken to Prepare Himself. Another plausible reason Jesus spoke beforehand with His closest companions about

these horrors was that it helped *Him* prepare for suffering. He was thoroughly human with a natural aversion to misery, and thoroughly righteous, craving God's fellowship (Heb 5.7).

[Consider what this] implies with respect to the majesty of Christ's love. . . . [Admittedly,] the *gradual* revelation of the approaching events had a pedagogical [teaching] purpose. But the possibility must also be granted that even in the human consciousness of our Lord the "feel" of the approaching horror was little by little becoming more real. There was nothing static about the mind of Jesus. . . . the horror must have been very real and very terrifying. The Man of sorrows sees it coming toward Him. He already senses something of the perfidy [deceitfulness], the hypocrisy, the calumny [slander], the mockery, the pain, and the shame which like an avalanche threatens to overwhelm Him. Yet, He does not retreat or even stand still. With unflinching determination He walks right into it, for He knows that this is necessary in order that His people may be saved (Hendriksen, in loc.).

ANNOUNCED BY SCRIPTURE (18.31b)

Jesus said that when they got to Jerusalem, "all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man shall be accomplished." As true God, Jesus knew His end by virtue of divine omniscience. As true Man, Jesus knew His end by familiarity with the sacred writings in the Jewish canon, what we now know as the OT, and what Jews of those days called "the Scriptures."

The Nature of the Scriptures. Jesus characterizes them as "written by the prophets," or more strictly, "*through* the prophets" (e.g., ASV). The preposition stresses their mere instrumentality, instead of ultimate authorship which belongs to God. The Scriptures are the Word of God written through men. About 40 men wrote over a period of about 1500 years, but the Bible is actually *God's* Word. This is Jesus' view of the Scriptures. After a long and detailed analysis of the gospels on this issue, one scholar wrote,

According to the teaching of Christ, Scripture originated with God. He taught clearly that the Word of God was the product of God's revelation. For Him what the OT declared in the words of its human writers God said. . . . He believed the revelation extended to the very words of Scripture. . . . Christ recognized His place in the Scriptures and taught that Moses and all the prophets wrote and spoke of Him (Lightner, The Savior and the Scriptures, pp. 161-162).

Failure to share Jesus' presuppositions about biblical inspiration, authority, infallibility, inerrancy, and sufficiency, ruins one's ability to interpret and understand what Scripture teaches. For example, many allegedly Christian scholars, recognizing the great detail of 18.32-33,

have characterized it as a "*vaticinium ex eventu*," that is, "a prophecy arising out of—and therefore made after—the event" to which it refers. Hendriksen reasonably protests, "A prophecy that 'grows out of an event' is no prophecy at all!"³ In other words, liberal scholars confess Jesus' general knowledge that He would suffer and die at Jerusalem, but they say that the later gospel-writers embellished these sayings of Jesus after the church had begun evangelizing to make them more impressive and persuasive. Such theories only expose the scholars' unbelief and apostasy from Jesus. They do not share His biblical faith, and therefore as Christian teachers, they are only imposters.

The Prophetic Role of the Son of Man. "Concerning the Son of Man" is Jesus' reference to Himself using one of His favorite self-designations. This title suggests Jesus' true humanity, and it is also connected with the idea that He is preeminently the "Servant of the LORD" (Jehovah). Though Jesus does not mention any specific OT passages, some He might have had in mind include Psa 16.10-11; 22.1, 6-8, 14-18; Isa 50.6; 52.13-14; 53.4-12. These are the prophetic "sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow" (1 Pet 1.11). After the sufferings were over, Jesus explained further how they related to specific OT texts (Luke 24.25-26, 44-46).

The Certainty of Fulfillment. "All things . . . shall be accomplished," that is, carried out, performed, fulfilled. The idea is that whatever Scripture states will be a part of Christ's first mission and suffering, all of it, will necessarily and actually come to pass in time/space history, in Christ's own experience, exactly as it was written of Him. The same word for "accomplished" is used very similarly in Acts 13.29 and Luke 22.37 where Jesus explicitly cites Isa 53.12.

"Yes, everything written about me by the prophets will come true" (paraphrase of Luke 22.37). Logically, this must be the case, since the predictions of the OT prophets are the very word of God, who ordains the end from the beginning and knows all things. God had a terrible plan for Jesus' life, and it had to be, and was, accomplished to the letter, for His glory and the certain salvation of all God's elect.

REQUIRED HIS SUFFERING (18.32-33)

Jesus did not leave the "all things written by the prophets" concerning Him unspecified on this occasion. With words that make the thoughtful reader wince and weep, Jesus spelled it all out in considerable detail.

Great sufferings were in store for Him, excruciating agonies both of body and soul. Jesus uses seven verbs to describe them, beginning with the passive voice, revealing what would happen to Him, inviting our sympathy and gratitude. Then Jesus shifted to the active voice, describing

³ Hendriksen, in loc.

what His enemies would do to Him, provoking our anger and self-condemnation, since they acted as we would but for God's grace, and they were God's instruments to punish Him for our sins. Finally, using the middle voice, Jesus shows what He would do for Himself in response, eliciting our praise and celebration.

First, consider **THE GREATNESS OF JESUS' SUFFERINGS**.

1) He Shall Be Delivered unto the Gentiles. The verb means "to deliver a person into the control of someone else, [in this case] involving . . . the handing over of an individual to an enemy who will presumably take undue advantage of the victim" (GELNTBSD). The agent is not specified here, but in Matt 20.18-19 the betrayal by Judas Iscariot comes first, and then "the chief priests and the scribes" are identified as those who would deliver Jesus to the Gentiles. Later we read that, "the chief priests and elders of the people . . . delivered [Jesus] to Pontius Pilate the governor" (Matt 27.1-2), the main Gentile authority figure in Jerusalem. This was the prelude to Jesus' most severe sufferings.

The trial of Jesus was complex, with three phases before the Jews (Annas, Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin) and then three phases before the Gentiles (Pilate, Herod Antipas, Pilate again). In Luke's gospel the Roman phases begin with 23.1-2 when this particular prediction begins to be fulfilled. Only the Romans, not the Jews, had legal authority to crucify, which is what the Jews wanted.

2) He Shall Be Mocked. Christ was then subjected to insolent and contemptuous ridicule. At this lowest point in His life so far, evil men mercilessly mocked Him. Luke notes it specifically in three places, but this was not all.

- At the high priest's house the men who held Jesus mocked Him, blindfolding Him and striking Him in the face, and then challenging Him to tell them which one of them had delivered the blow (22.63-64).
- Herod with his soldiers treated Jesus with contempt and mocked Him, arraying Him in a gorgeous robe, to make Him look like the kind of king they thought He claimed to be, but obviously now, was not (23.11). Heartless ridicule!
- Even after Jesus was on the cross, the mocking continued. The soldiers there said to Him, "If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself" (23.36). This was a challenge they intended as a convincing demonstration of Jesus' helplessness and deceit.

3) He Shall Be "Spitefully Entreated". The Greek has been variously translated as "insulted" (NKJV), "shamefully treated" (ESV), and "mistreated" (NIV). In this context it means "mistreat with insolence," combining violent abuse with an arrogant attitude on the part of the abuser (GELNTBSD). The OT uses the same term to describe the

scoffer who works unrighteously and proudly against the righteous (Bock, e.g., Psa 94.2-7; cf. Matt 27.39-40).

4) He Shall Be Spitted On. This hateful indecency is self-explanatory, and it happened to Him many times (e.g., Mark 14.65), but a closer look affords more insight:

Spit [was a] source of legal defilement, e.g., the spittle of a person having an issue defiled the one upon whom it fell (Lev 15.8). To spit in one's face was regarded as the grossest insult (Num 12.14; Deut 25.9; Isa 50.6; Matt 26.67; 27.30); indeed, it was a great indignity to spit toward anyone, so that an oriental never allows himself to spit in the presence of one whom he respects (*New Unger's Bible Dictionary*).

It almost seems too clinical to study these words this way, but it can help us appreciate exactly what was going on in Jesus' passion. Think of it—Jesus suffered treatment befitting human scum, the most vile person on the face of the earth! Oh Jesus, we deserved all this, not You!

Second, reflect on **THE UNJUST CRUELTY OF HIS ENEMIES**.

5) They Shall Scourge Him. The verb means to beat severely with a whip, to flog, used "of the beating (Lat. *verberatio*) given [by the Romans to] those condemned to death." This was "a custom that was often part of the crucifixion process" (Bock). D. A. Carson explains further:

Flogging administered by the Romans could take one of three forms: the *fustigatio*, a less severe beating meted out for relatively light offenses such as hooliganism, and often accompanied by a severe warning; the *flagellatio*, a brutal flogging administered to criminals whose offenses were more serious; and the *verberatio*, the most terrible scourging of all, and one that was always associated with other punishments, including crucifixion. In this last form, the victim was stripped and tied to a post, and then beaten by several torturers (in the Roman provinces they were soldiers) until they were exhausted, or their commanding chief officer called them off. For victims who, like Jesus, were neither Roman citizens nor soldiers, the favored instrument was a whip whose leather thongs were fitted with pieces of bone or lead or other metal. The beatings were so savage that the victims sometimes died. Eyewitness records report that such brutal scourgings could leave victims with their bones and entrails exposed (on John 19.1).

Jesus probably received both the first and third kind of floggings—the first merely to appease the Jews, and the latter making Jesus too wounded and weak to carry His own cross very far and hastening His death by crucifixion just before the Sabbath. Sometimes crucifixion took days to kill its victim.

6) *They Shall Put Him to Death*. Crucifixion was climax of their abuse, and it was worse than you probably ever imagined.

After all this, he is delivered over to be crucified. The Jewish historian Josephus called crucifixion “the most pitiable death.” Cicero called it “that cruel and disgusting punishment.” . . . After this flogging, still naked, a beam of wood was laid across their shoulders. The criminal was then forced to carry the splintered, wooden beam on their skinless back to a point outside the city. Once there, the beam would be laid on the ground. The criminals arms would be stretched out and either tied or nailed to the beam. The crossbeam would then be hoisted up onto an upright beam, just high enough for their feet to be off the ground. Their legs were twisted and a single nail was driven through both ankles. The victim was then left to hang naked in the sun. It could take hours, often days for them to die. Since (unlike many film portrayals) the average cross was only six to seven feet high, dogs and wild animals attracted by the scent of blood could feast on a victim left hanging over night. A live victim could be eaten by vultures or ravens. In order to avoid asphyxiation, he had to push himself up with his legs and pull with his arms, triggering muscle spasms that caused unimaginable pain. A seat was often affixed to the cross for the victim to rest on. This was not to provide relief, but to prolong their suffering. The end would come through heart failure, brain damage caused by reduced oxygen supply, suffocation, or shock.⁴

Finally, after six agonizing hours suffering the torture of crucifixion, Jesus was to bow His head and give up the ghost. He would and did fulfill this terrible plan.

Those humanly responsible for the murder of Christ has been hotly debated. Here, “they” refers to the Gentiles; in Acts 3.15, the Jews are blamed. Both groups had bloody hands. In fact, if it were not for sinners like us, there would have been no need for Jesus to suffer and die like this.

Ultimately, Christ was “delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2.23). All that wicked men did to Jesus, even crucifying Him, only carried out the divine decree (Isa 53.10).

Finally, recall **HIS GLORIOUS TRIUMPH OVER ALL THIS**.

7) *He Shall Rise Again the Third Day*. This is the one thing of the seven specifically attributed to *Him*. It means that though He really died and was buried in a tomb, on the third day His physical body (the same one in which He lived, and in which He was crucified) would literally come to life again, and He would give “many infallible proofs” of this to His disciples (Acts 1.3). And of course that is exactly

what happened (Luke 24.1 ff.). The disciples should have rejoiced over this good news, but none of what Jesus was saying really clicked with them.

HIDDEN FROM HIS DISCIPLES (18.34)

With small variations, the same basic truth is stated three times.

And they understood none of these things:
and this saying was hid from them,
neither knew they the things which were spoken.

The verb for “understood” means literally, “to send together,” and is like our common idioms, “put two and two together” and “connect the dots.” It is not that they lost the ability to interpret words and sentences, but rather that “they were unable to grasp the full implications and real intent of the saying” (UBS Hdbk.) What Jesus had described was so far removed from their mistaken conceptions about the OT Messiah’s earthly career that they could not take it in. They found it much easier to believe in a “successful Messiah,” than in one who would appear to be a complete disgrace and failure. And yet, as the OT insisted, the cross of Christ had to come before His crown.

This verse implies that God kept the disciples from any clearer knowledge than they had about these things. Perhaps it would have been too much for them to handle, too great a temptation for them to overcome, one that would have caused them to abandon Jesus immediately and completely. If so, then God was merciful in sparing them this full knowledge beforehand.

That would also imply that Jesus was already suffering, since He knew perfectly well and most certainly what was about to happen to Him, with all its obscene misery. As I told you, Jesus knew God had a horrific plan for His life, and from zeal toward God and love for His chosen people, Jesus deliberately pursued it. What a wonderful Savior! What committed faith, great courage, sacrificial love, and astounding grace!

If you believe this gospel is true—if you realize this could not possibly be a cunningly devised fable made up by men—then how can you not love and appreciate Jesus in response? How could you not give yourself to Him without reservation, and serve Him for the rest of your life? I challenge every one of you to do that right now. And I exhort my fellow-believers to seek levels of loving devotion to Christ beyond anything you have every known before, by His grace. Amen.