

# The Passion and Death of Jesus

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<http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Passion.htm>

Although the Passion Narratives of all four Gospels are similar in many ways, there are also significant differences among them. In many respects, the three Synoptics agree with each other (since Matthew and Luke are almost certainly based on Mark), while John's account is quite different, especially in matters of chronology. In other respects, while Matthew and Mark are nearly identical, Luke may differ from them and be much closer to John's account. Moreover, some well-known details, or even whole episodes, are found in only one of the four Gospels.

## I. EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE PASSOVER FEAST: What happened shortly BEFORE Jesus died?

### A. *The Plot to Kill Jesus:*

The Synoptic Gospels all show the Jewish authorities (chief priests, elders and/or scribes) plotting to kill Jesus, but hesitant of people's reactions, esp. due to the nearness of Passover (Mark 14:1-2; Matt 26:1-5; Luke 22:1-2). Mark and Matthew say it was two days before Passover, while Luke less precisely says that the Passover "was near."

John's Gospel similarly tells of the authorities' plotting, but highlights the leading role of Caiaphas, the high priest (John 11:47-53).

### B. *Jesus is Anointed by a Woman:*

In all four Gospels, a woman anoints Jesus during a meal; but the woman's identity and the time and location of the event are very different.

In Mark 14:3-9 and Matt 26:6-13, *two days before* the Passover, in the *house of Simon the leper* in Bethany (near Jerusalem), an *anonymous woman* (not called a "sinner") anoints Jesus' *head* with expensive ointment. Some people complain about the waste, saying the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor; but Jesus commends the woman, saying the anointing was a preparation for his burial.

In John 12:1-8, the anointing also takes place in Bethany, but *six days before* Passover, and in the *house of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus*. It is this *Mary of Bethany* (not Mary Magdalene, and again *not* called a "sinner") who anoints Jesus' *feet* and wipes them with her hair. Judas Iscariot is singled out as the one who complains about the waste, but Jesus' reaction again makes reference to his upcoming burial.

The only anointing story in Luke is not part of the Passion Narrative, but much earlier (7:36-50), while Jesus is still up in Galilee. An anonymous but *sinful woman* anoints Jesus' *feet* while he is eating in the *house of an anonymous Pharisee*, who complains not about the waste of the ointment, but that Jesus allows a sinful woman to touch him. In response, Jesus talks about love and forgiveness, not about his own death.

### C. *Judas Plans to Betray Jesus:*

In all three Synoptics, Judas Iscariot agrees to betray Jesus to the chief priests (Mark 14:10-11, par.); but only Matthew specifies that it was for "thirty pieces of silver" (Matt 26:15; cf. 27:3, 9), and only Luke mentions the influence of Satan on Judas (22:3-6).

John's Gospel also mentions Satan's influence on Judas (6:70-71; 13:2, 27), but does not say that Judas ever met with the high priests.

## II. THE LAST SUPPER: What is the significance of Jesus' last meal with his disciples?

### A. The Synoptic Gospels:

Jesus sends some disciples (only Luke says it was Peter and John) into Jerusalem to prepare for his last meal; in all three Synoptics, it is clearly a *Passover Meal*, which commemorates the Exodus of the Jews (Mark 14:12; Matt 26:17; Luke 22:7-8, 15).

All three Synoptics show Jesus speaking the blessing prayers, and saying the bread and wine is his own body and blood (Mark 14:22-25; Matt 26:26-29; Luke 22:15-20; also 1 Cor 11:23-25).

Only Luke (and Paul) has Jesus explicitly say, "*Do this* in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19b; cf. 1 Cor 11:24, 25).

Only Luke gives evidence of the Passover tradition of blessing *multiple* cups of wine (Luke 22:17, 20).

Luke also has much more dialogue *during* the Last Supper, including Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial (Luke 22:31-34; cf. John 13:36-38).

In Mark and Matthew, Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial takes place just after the supper, as they are on their way to Gethsemane (Mark 14:26-31; Matt 26:30-35).

### B. The Fourth Gospel:

Jesus' Last Supper is *not* a Passover Meal, but takes place just *before* the Feast of Passover (John 13:1); in John, Jesus will *die* on the same afternoon that the Passover Lambs are slaughtered (cf. 19:31-37).

The "Eucharistic" words of Jesus are not recorded in John 13, but were already spoken *earlier* (6:22-59).

*During* this final meal in John's Gospel, Jesus washes all of his disciples' feet (John 13:2-16).

Then he tells them, "I have given you an example, that *you also should do* as I have done to you" (13:15).

During the meal, Jesus foretells *Judas' betrayal* (John 13:21-30) and *Peter's denial* (13:36-38).

During the meal, Jesus also gives a "Farewell Discourse" (13:31 — 16:33) and addresses a long prayer to God (17:1-26).

## III. THE AGONY AND ARREST IN THE GARDEN: WHERE and HOW was Jesus captured?

### A. The Synoptic Gospels:

After the Passover meal, Jesus and his disciples go out to the "Mount of Olives" (Mark 14:26; Matt 26:30; Luke 22:39).

The place where Jesus prays is called "Gethsemane" (Mark 14:32; Matt 26:36), but it is not explicitly called a "garden."

Luke greatly shortens Jesus' prayer and his challenges to the disciples (11 verses in both Mark & Matt; only 6 verses in Luke).

In all three Synoptics, Judas identifies Jesus with a kiss (Mark 14:43-46; Matt 26:47-50); but in Luke, Jesus interrupts this action by asking, "Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48).

## **B. The Fourth Gospel:**

After Jesus finishes his discourses and prayer, they go "across the Kidron Valley" and enter a "garden," but this is not explicitly identified as "Gethsemane" (John 18:1).

There is no "agony" or any prayer of Jesus in this garden; it is only the scene of Jesus' arrest (18:2-12).

Jesus remains in control of the scene; the soldiers hesitate to arrest Jesus when twice he says "I am" (18:6, 8).

All four Gospels say that one of Jesus' disciples cut off the ear of the high priest's slave; but only in John are these two individuals explicitly named: Simon Peter and Malchus (18:10).

## **IV. THE ACCUSATIONS AND CHARGES: WHY was Jesus killed, and BY WHOM?**

**A. *The Religious Inquest:*** The Jewish High Priest and Sanhedrin (council of elders) find Jesus guilty of blaspheming God.

Mark 14:61-64 and Matt 26:63-66 explicitly use the word "blasphemy," while Luke 22:67-71 and John 18:19-23 use slightly different expressions.

The word "*blasphemy*" in ancient Greek literally means "insulting or saying bad things about God." The punishment prescribed in the Hebrew Bible for blasphemy is to be *stoned* to death (Lev 24:10-23).

Jesus directly admits that he is "the *Christ, the Son of the Blessed (i.e. God)*" in Mark (14:61-62) while his answer is slightly vaguer in the other Gospels (Matt 26:64; Luke 22:67-68; cf. Mark 15:39; John 19:7).

**B. *The Political Trial(s):*** The Roman procurator of Judea (Pontius Pilate) finds Jesus guilty of sedition, rebellion, or treason.

Luke's Gospel describes the nature of the *charges* against Jesus in the greatest detail (Luke 23:2, 5, 14).

Jesus is accused of calling himself and/or letting others call him "*King of the Jews*" (Mark 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32, and parallels; cf. also John 18:33-37; 19:12-15).

Only in Luke, Pilate interrupts the trial by sending Jesus to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, who was also in Jerusalem for the Passover (Luke 23:6-12).

In Matthew and Mark, Pilate fairly quickly agrees to the Jewish authorities' request to have Jesus condemned (Mark 15:2-15;

In Luke and John, Pilate repeatedly asserts Jesus' *innocence* (Luke 23:4, 13-15, 22; John 18:38b; 19:4, 6, 12; cf. Matt 27:24-25).;

Only Matthew mentions Pilate's wife, her dream and Pilate washing his hands. (Matt 27:19-24)

## **V. THE CRUCIFIXION AND DEATH: HOW was Jesus executed?**

### **A. *Condemnation to Death:***

In lands occupied by the Romans, the death penalty could *only* be carried out with the approval of the local Roman governor (cf. John 18:31).

Mark and Matthew explicitly say Jesus was handed over to *Roman* soldiers to be crucified; but Luke and John (using ambiguous pronouns) make it seem like Pilate handed Jesus over to the *Jewish* authorities to carry out the crucifixion (Luke 23:25; John 19:16).

## ***B. Beatings and Scourging:***

*Before* being crucified, condemned prisoners were often beaten, scourged, mocked, and mistreated in other ways.

Prisoners might already *die* from this maltreatment, so Jewish law limited floggings to thirty-nine lashes (cf. 2 Cor 11:24).

Since Jesus was condemned for claiming to be "King of the Jews," the soldiers mock him with the symbols of *royal* power and authority, including a scarlet (or purple) cloak, a crown (of thorns), and a reed (instead of a scepter).

## ***C. Road to Golgotha:***

Condemned persons would usually be forced to *carry their own cross beams* to the place of their crucifixion, as Jesus does in John 19:17; in contrast, Simon of Cyrene is compelled to help carry Jesus' cross in the Synoptics (Mark 15:21; Matt 27:32; Luke 23:26).

Only Luke tells of *Jesus speaking with women* along the way to the cross (Luke 23:27-31), but none of the Gospels contains the full fourteen "Stations of the Cross" that later became popular in Christian devotions.

*Golgotha*, meaning "Place of the Skull" (Mark 15:22, par.) was probably an abandoned stone quarry just outside of Jerusalem.

## ***D. Manner of Crucifixion:***

The cross was usually *T-shaped*, with the cross beam placed on top of an upright post already set in the ground.

The victim might be *tied and/or nailed* to the cross beam and to the upright post; only John explicitly mentions "nails" and "nail marks" (John 20:25; cf. Col 2:14), while Jesus may well have been tied to the cross, based on the Synoptics (cf. Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29)..

Crucified persons had to be guarded by soldiers, to prevent family or friends from rescuing them before they died.

The *charge* would often be affixed over the head of the condemned criminal, to serve as a warning to any onlookers: **INRI** = **I**esus **N**azareus **R**ex **I**udaeorum, Latin for "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (John 19:19-22; cf. Mark 15:26).

Only John gives this full inscription, and says it was posted in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek; it is briefer in the Synoptics ("This is Jesus the King of the Jews" in Matt 27:37; "This is the King of the Jews" in Luke 23:38; only "The King of the Jews" in Mark 15:26).

## ***E. Cause of Death:***

Some victims might bleed to death fairly quickly, but some *could survive for several days* before succumbing to a combination of dehydration and asphyxiation.

To *prolong* the victims' agony, their feet would be tied or nailed to the post, so that they could push themselves up to breathe.

To *hasten* the victims' deaths, their legs might be broken, so that they could no longer breathe (cf. John 19:31-36).

## ***F. "Seven Last Words of Christ": (Think of "phrases, or statements.")***

Traditional Good Friday devotions recall the seven "utterances" (Greek *logos* = "word, phrase, sentence, speech") that Jesus spoke while hanging on the cross; none of the Gospels contain all seven phrases, however, but only one, or at most three of them:

1. Re. those crucifying him: "***Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.***" (Luke 23:34)
2. To his mother: "***Woman, behold your son***"; and to the beloved disciple: "***Behold your mother.***" (John 19:26-27) ("Woman, his is your son . . . "Son, her is your mother.")
3. To the repentant thief: "***Amen I say to you, today you will be in paradise.***" (Luke 23:43)
4. At the ninth hour: "***Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?***" which means, "***My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?***" (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46)
5. In order to fulfill scripture: "***I am thirsty.***" (John 19:28)
6. After receiving a drink of vinegar: "***It is finished.***" (John 19:30)
7. As Jesus is dying: "***Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.***" (Luke 23:46)

## ***G. The Witnesses to the Crucifixion:***

In the Synoptics, many women who had followed Jesus from Galilee were "looking on from afar" (Mark 15:40; Matt 27:55; cf. Luke 23:49).

Mark names three women (Mary Magdalene; Mary the mother of James and Joses; and Salome); Matthew names the same three (?) slightly differently (Mary Magdalene; Mary the mother of James and Joseph; and the mother of the sons of Zebedee); but in Luke the women remain anonymous.

A Roman centurion who witnessed the scene declares, "Truly this man was *the son of God*" (Mark 15:39; Matt 27:54), or "...was *innocent*" (Luke 23:47).

In John 19:25-26, four women (his mother; his mother's sister; Mary the wife of Clopas; and Mary Magdalene--or three, if #2 = #3 ?) as well as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (not named, but called "son") are "standing by the cross" (i.e. very close to it).

## **THE BURIAL: BY WHOM and WHEN and HOW and WHERE was Jesus buried?**

### ***A. By Whom?***

A certain Joseph, from the Judean town of Arimathea (exact location unknown); he is called a "respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43); "a rich man" and "also a disciple of Jesus" (Matt 27:57); "a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their purpose and deed" (Luke 23:50); and "a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews" (John 19:38).

Only John mentions that Nicodemus, who had previously encountered Jesus, also helped with Jesus' burial (19:39; cf. 3:1; 7:50).

### ***B. When?***

After Joseph secures permission from Pontius Pilate to retrieve Jesus' body (Mark 15:43 & par.). After Pilate was assured that Jesus was dead, based on the testimony of a centurion (Mark 15:44-45) and/or the piercing of Jesus' side (John 19:31-37).

On Friday afternoon just before sundown [when the Sabbath begins], so the burial was done hurriedly (Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:42).

### ***C. How?***

By wrapping Jesus' body in a linen cloth (Mark 15:46 & par.), placing it in a rock-hewn tomb, and rolling a large stone against the entrance (Mark 15:46 & par.).

In John 19:40, they also wrapped the body with a large mixture of spices (myrrh & aloes), according to Jewish burial customs.

But in the Synoptics, they did not use spices right away (evidently for lack of time before sunset); rather, the women prepared spices after going home (Luke 23:56), and intended to embalm the body properly after the Sabbath (Mark 16:1).

### ***D. Where?***

The Synoptics do not mention the location of the tomb, but only say that it was hewn out of rock (Mark 15:46 & par.).

Luke 23:53 and John 19:41 add that no one else had been buried in this tomb before, while Matt 27:60 claims that it was Joseph of Arimathea's *own* new tomb.

Only John 19:41-42 says that the tomb was in a "garden" *near* the place where Jesus had been crucified.

Only Matt 27:62-66 says that some soldiers were stationed to guard Jesus' tomb, lest the disciples steal his body (cf. 28:11-15).