

MARCH - JUNE 2014

MCI (P) 165/03/2014

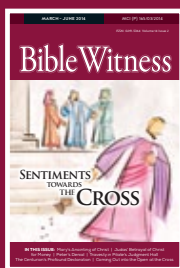
ISSN: 0219-5364 Volume 14 Issue 2

Bible Witness



SENTIMENTS TOWARDS THE CROSS

IN THIS ISSUE: Mary's Anointing of Christ | Judas' Betrayal of Christ
for Money | Peter's Denial | Travesty in Pilate's Judgment Hall
The Centurion's Profound Declaration | Coming Out into the Open at the Cross



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Postage and handling charges for 2 years (12 issues):

SURFACE MAIL	Singapore/Malaysia S\$10.00	Other Countries S\$14.00
AIR MAIL	Asia S\$26.00	Other Countries S\$34.00

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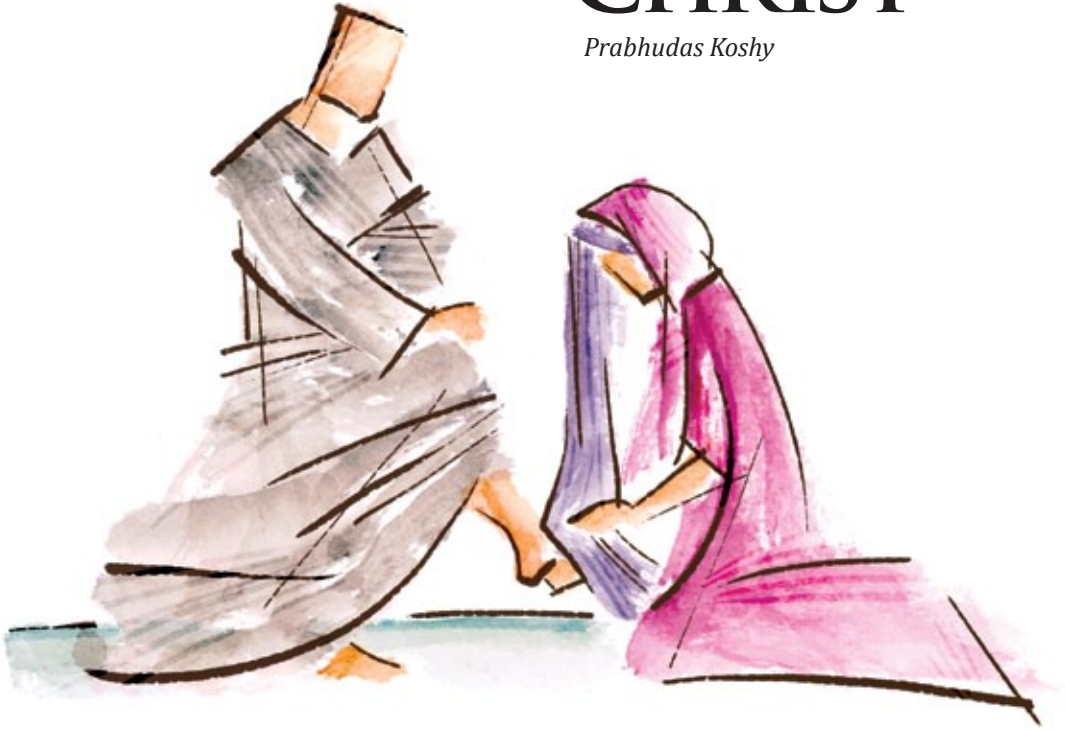
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MARY'S ANOINTING OF CHRIST

Prabhudas Koshy



Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, was one who profoundly loved the Lord Jesus Christ. She treasured every word that He uttered and hence, loved to sit at His feet to learn from Him (cf. Luke 10:39). Nothing, not even her sister's ire and seemingly justifiable complaint (cf. Luke 10:40), would deter her from giving Him her full attention. She unreservedly received all that He said with faith. The genuineness and maturity of her faith and her love for Christ were fully revealed when she anointed Him with the very costly ointment of spikenard.

This event evidently happened a few days before Jesus' crucifixion. He was in Bethany, apparently in the house of a man called Simon, the leper (cf. Matthew 26:6; Mark 14:3; John 12:1). Jesus and all His disciples were there together for a meal. Martha was busy serving them, while Lazarus was sitting at the table with Christ and the disciples. Mary then came with an alabaster box of ointment and anointed Christ – His head, body and feet – with it (cf. Matthew 26:7, 12; Mark 14:3, 8; John 12:3). She then humbly stooped down and wiped His feet with her hair (cf. John 12:3).

Though it was a common practice at the Jewish festive meals to anoint a guest's head, Mary's act had far surpassed their custom. She was far more lavish in her anointing than anyone of her stature would have done. The ointment that Mary poured on Christ was known as spikenard, and it was very costly. The disciples at the scene estimated its cost to be 300 pence or denarii (cf. Mark 14:5; John 12:5), which was equivalent to a year's wages! The disciples deemed her action to be imprudent and unnecessary. Judas jibed at her action, grumbling: "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?" (John 12:5; cf. Matthew 26:9). He suggested that it could have been put to better use. But Jesus quickly came to Mary's defence, chided Judas and the rest of the disciples, saying, "Why trouble ye the woman?" (Matthew 26:10), and commanded them to "let her alone" (John 12:7).

Though her actions appeared unusual, Jesus disclosed the special sentiments and noble purposes behind her unsparing act of love and devotion to Him. It is important that we carefully observe the Lord's comments about her action.

She Wrought a Good Work on Christ

Though ignorant men censured her action, the LORD vindicated her and judged that it was good. He remarked that "she hath wrought a good work upon me" (Matthew 26:10). Jesus affirmed that her anointing of Him was good. Every act done in love and honour of Christ can only be virtuous.

Her work extraordinaire was most suitable for the heavenly Lover of her soul. In her heart, nothing was too costly to be offered to Him as her gift of love. Mary's

motive was pure. She poured the oil on Christ with the singular goal of honouring Him. She was completely given to her devotion and admiration for His person. She was not thinking how little she could give Him, but how best she could express her joy and reverence for Him who had condescended to be her Saviour and Lord. She was unashamed and unafraid in her devotion. It was her special way of manifesting her love though it shocked the twelve. Mary was not at all intimidated by how others would perceive or criticise her action. Her heart was full of His glory. So Jesus said that it was "a good work upon me".

There is no higher, nobler act than that which is done to the glory of Christ. Total devotion to the Lord's person is the grandest of Christian virtues. Only that which is done for Christ's glory shall be ultimately counted as good.

She Gave What She Could

After Mary had anointed Him, Jesus further remarked, "She hath done what she could" (Mark 14:8). Martha, Mary's sister, gave her best by serving the Lord and the guests at the table. Lazarus, Mary's brother, sat with the Lord, bearing witness to Christ's divine power that had brought him out of the grave. Jesus says Mary also gave her best by pouring the perfumed oil on Him and wiping His feet with her hair. Mary could not do what others were doing for the Lord. But she did not shy away from honouring the Lord. Mary's gift was unlike Martha's, but she did what she could.

Because she knew that the Lord would lay down His life for her salvation, she purposed in her heart to give with all her might what her hands could offer. So she did according to the best of her ability. She seized the

opportunity to honour her Lord by anointing Him with her very best. If she had not done it then, she could not have done it at all. This comment of the Lord shows that He regarded her action as a practical evidence of her gratitude and love towards Him.

She Anointed Christ in View of His Burial

Another profound comment that Jesus made about Mary's action was: "she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying" (Mark 14:8; cf. Matthew 26:12; John 12:7). Mary not only paid attention to Jesus' assertion that He had come to lay down His life for His people, but also believed it with all her heart. She believed with all her heart that Jesus would die and be buried for three days. Her faith in His assertion that He had come to die for sinners stirred her heart to such a high level of adoration that she poured the exquisite oil she possessed and bowed to wipe His feet with her hair.

She emptied her valuable ointment on Him because of His impending death. What a contrast it was with the evil work of Judas who betrayed Christ for 30 pieces of silver! Mary's was an astonishing

work of faith whereas the other an awful act of unbelief. Moreover, we see none else besides her making any effort to apprehend and highlight His forthcoming crucifixion, death and burial. Her faith and understanding concerning Christ's mission was most outstanding. Jesus honoured that by concluding with an amazing pronouncement: "Verily I say unto you, Whosoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her" (Mark 14:9; cf. Matthew 26:13). Mary understood the real message of the Gospel that Christ had come to die for our salvation. So wherever the Gospel is preached, she will be remembered for her astounding expression of faith in the Gospel of Christ. Mary's act of faith and love, though criticized by Judas and the other disciples (John 12:4-6), was not only accepted by Jesus, but is also to be perennially commended to the church throughout the world. ■



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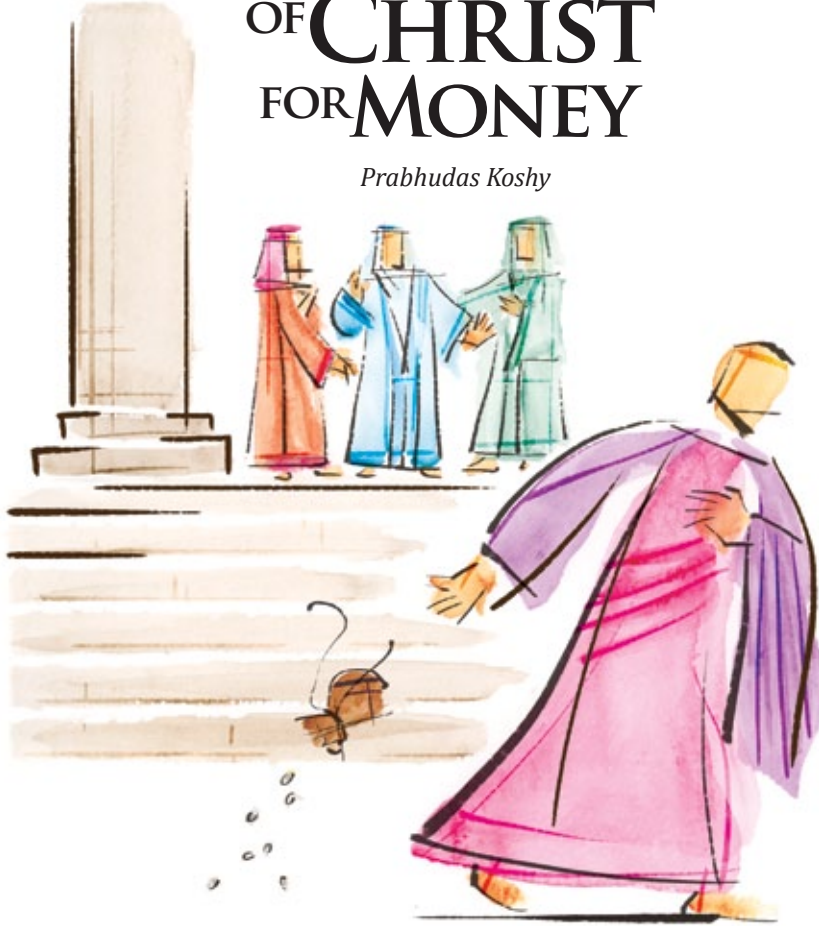


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JUDAS' BETRAYAL OF CHRIST FOR MONEY

Prabhudas Koshy



Judas Iscariot was “one of the twelve” (Matthew 26:14, 47) whom Christ had appointed as His apostles (Matthew 10:2-4). But he followed Christ with an ulterior motive. He exploited the kindness and friendship which Christ extended to him. He kept his eyes peeled for any opportunity to gratify his ravenous, greedy heart’s desires. The Apostle John recorded that Judas “was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein” (John 12:6).

Judas’ Awful Greed

Judas was so consumed by avarice that he could not tolerate, let alone appreciate, the grateful liberality of Mary who anointed Jesus with the precious ointment of spikenard. He took the lead in attacking her thoughtful action. He argued that the perfume could have fetched 300 pence, and that it should have been sold and given to the poor. John uncovered the motive

behind Judas' rationalisation, when he wrote about it: "This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief" (John 12:6). Judas had been shamelessly misappropriating some of the money which was given to meet the needs of Jesus and the disciples, as well as for the poor.

Judas' habit of pilfering became so unrestrained that he plotted to hand Christ over to His enemies for a price. His flirting with avarice "hoodwinked" his conscience into condoning his blatant treason. When money became his chief fascination, Judas completely lost his sense of respect, gratitude and loyalty towards his Master. His fascination with money finally seduced him into betraying his Master. He had no qualms about committing such a treacherous, heinous act – all for the sake of money!

Judas' Awful Choice

Matthew recorded that Judas Iscariot went unto the chief priests and asked, "What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver. And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him" (Matthew 26:15-16). From this account, we can see that Judas went to the chief priests not because he was motivated by a sense of divine or public duty, but simply because he wanted to make money by handing Christ over to them. He bargained on a price for Christ, saying, "What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you?" He wanted to be sure that he would get the money; so he asked that they should give it to him first, and then he would deliver Christ to them.

Judas put a price (alas, a meagre sum!) on Christ who came to give His life as a ransom for the redemption of sinners. The thirty pieces of silver, which he agreed with the chief priests for handing over Christ, was the price of a slave, according to Exodus 21:32. It

is very likely that by offering thirty pieces of silver, the chief priests were expressing their contempt for Christ. It also shows how mean and callous Judas was, that he would betray his Lord for any sum at all!

Judas' Awful Regret

Soon, Judas would recognise what a ghastly mistake he had made by choosing money at the expense of Christ. Matthew 27:3-5 records: "Then Judas, which had betrayed him (Jesus), when he saw that he (Jesus) was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself." Judas could not bear any longer the reality of the horrible choice that he had made. That which he coveted for himself became unbearable to his own mind. He had no more pleasure in the silver that he had obsessively sought after. The thirty pieces of silver coins, which had been so dear to him not too long ago, began to pierce his conscience like a thousand spears. He must get rid of them at once! So he went back to the chief priests and elders, and cast all the thirty silver coins before them, confessing his sin of betraying the innocent blood of Christ.

Though Judas confessed that Jesus was innocent, he would not turn to Him as his Redeemer. He would not trust, at all, the truths that Jesus had taught the disciples concerning His redemptive mission on earth. His materialistic, hypocritical heart just could not take hold of Christ by faith. All the opportunities had been lost on him. He was remorseful, but would not come to Christ. He hanged himself instead. Peter gives us more details of his awful end: "Now this man purchased a field with the

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reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out" (Acts 1:18). He literally rushed to his own destruction. With all his ill-gotten money, Judas bought a field, where he hanged himself, but only to fall headlong (presumably because of a broken rope or tree branch) and suffer a horrific end!

No one gains anything meaningful through covetousness. Jesus once remarked, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). Judas' tragic end became a fearful example of what would befall a man when Jesus' solemn warning was left unheeded.

Conclusion

To all those who claim to be followers of Christ and yet live a materialistic life, Judas' life of greed and treachery is a solemn warning. He lived and walked with Christ for more than three years, and yet ended up as a "son of perdition" (John 17:12), condemned forever! Judas' place in hell should be a sobering wake-up call, not to be ignored by those who despitely put Christ and His counsels aside for material gain.

Is your pursuit of wealth and worldly advancements causing you to ignore Christ and His righteousness? If so, you are in danger of eternal peril. If you have been disregarding Christ for worldly gain and pleasures, repent immediately and seek the Lord (who had died to save sinners) in sincerity and faith. For your eternal soul's sake, plead for His forgiveness and spiritual restoration. ■



PETER'S DENIAL

Joshua Yong



The cock crew" (Luke 22:60) – three simple but devastating words. A familiar sound of the rooster pierced right through the heart of Peter. With it also was pierced the aura of his self-perceived boldness and unflinching loyalty to his Master, whom he had earlier declared to be "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). As the crowing of the cock sounded through the quiet night, Peter

realised in shock that he had just denied his beloved Master thrice. It brought to his mind the Lord's forewarning: "before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice" (Matthew 26:34). Oh, what guilt and shame must have overwhelmed his heart!

This was the Lord with whom Peter spent his past three years. Sitting at the Lord's feet, he learned divine truth and wisdom. While

walking with the Lord, he witnessed mighty wonders which He did out of compassion and love for the troubled people. He was with the Lord at His transfiguration and witnessed His great glory. He loved Him dearly, and even promised to go to both prison and death with Him (Luke 22:33). And yet, Peter denied the Lord three times. But why?

Peter's idea of the Lord as the promised Messiah was One who never dies. So when Jesus said that He must "suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed" (Matthew 16:21), Peter became upset and "began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee" (Matthew 16:22). For this, Peter had duly earned a sharp "Get thee behind me, Satan" rebuke from the Lord (Matthew 16:23). His revulsion at the Lord's preoccupation with His death and his own cocksure confidence in himself culminated in his spiritual downfall. His lack of proper spiritual perception regarding Christ's death caused him to brush aside the Lord's pointed warnings.

The Solemn Warning

We read in Luke 22:31-32 that the Lord Jesus Christ had solemnly cautioned Peter at the Last Supper in the upper room, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat". The Lord's warning to Peter was direct and plain. The devil was seeking to ruin Peter's faith; but the Lord assured Peter, "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not". Obviously, these words of Christ affirmed that the devil would not succeed in his attempt, though he would severely destabilise Peter's spiritual joy and confidence.

Unfortunately, Peter failed to take the Lord seriously. He chose rather to appear self-confident about his devotion

to Him. Despite Jesus' sombre cautions of the coming night's bizarre events and severe testings of the disciples' faith and commitment, Peter continued in his disproportionate boasting (Luke 22:33; Matthew 26:33; Matthew 26:35). His words, though bold, would be proven empty. Admittedly, if there was one disciple who could be counted on to exhibit a "never-say-die" courage, it would have been Simon Peter. Throughout the gospels, we see the boldness of Peter. On several occasions, he had exercised his faith in Christ in amazing fashion, including his unbelievably fearless venture to walk on the sea at Christ's bidding (Matthew 14:24-29). However, his past victories were not enough to take him through the next challenge. He needed to humbly receive Christ's warnings and be cautious about the snares of the devil along the way. His lack of vigilance and too much self-confidence caused him to fail miserably.

Indeed, our times of failures must remind us of our own weaknesses. Hearing the cock crow, Peter must have realised how weak his claims were. While Peter boasted, he did not pray. He fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane. Though his declarations were sincere and genuine, he merely boasted in himself. Peter sincerely loved the Lord, but his faith had to grow. For his faith to grow, he had to realise and acknowledge his own frailty and weaknesses. Christians need to realise how poor, feeble and weak we are. Our moments of failures must lead us to ask these simple questions, "Have I been proud?" "Have I prayed?"

The Painful Denial

Peter's misconception of Christ's ultimate mission on earth set him up for the most humiliating experience of his self-assured life. While Peter was warming himself by the fire outside the palace, a slave girl of the high priest recognised him. She immediately

confronted him: “thou also wast with Jesus of Nazareth.” Peter, being afraid of the wrath of the Jews, right away denied knowing Christ, saying that he did not understand what that girl was talking about (Mark 14:66-68). As soon as he denied Christ the first time, the cock crew as though to forewarn him. But he did not take heed. When he walked out to the porch, another slave girl saw him and started to tell others that he was one of those who followed Christ. Peter again denied that he knew the Lord, but this time with an oath (Matthew 26:72). Then another among the bystanders confronted Peter, highlighting the fact that his speech sounded like a Galilean. Feeling intense pressure, Peter denied the third time, this time more vehemently with cursing and swearing (Mark 14:70b-71).

Then “the cock crew.” Peter was so engrossed in his own self-preservation that he lost himself. The cockcrowing now “woke” Peter up – he realised what he had done. Oh, how painful it must have been for Peter. When his eyes met the Lord’s, he “went out, and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:62). This rugged and tough fisherman was reduced to tears and so filled with remorse. How would he ever find comfort? Have you ever felt this way before?

The Gracious Restoration

Even though Peter failed to pray, the Lord Jesus Christ had prayed for him. Christ had earlier assured him that his faith would not die: “when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:32b). The word “converted” means “to return”. It carries the idea of restoration. The Lord said “when” and not “if”. In other words, Peter would certainly be restored. Christ would preserve his faith and restore him.

We see Christ’s restoration of Peter at the Sea of Galilee. At Peter’s initiative, the

disciples had gone back to fishing. Now when the risen Lord called out to Peter as He did so before, “Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find” (John 21:6), Peter was reminded of his first calling. That was how the Lord called him the first time at the same Sea of Galilee when he was still a fisherman and had laboured all night without a catch (Luke 5:4-5). The restoration was made complete when the Lord told Peter three times to feed his flock (John 21:15-17). Three times Peter denied the Lord, but three times the Lord reassured him. With this assurance, Peter (being devoid of self-boasting and filled with spiritual understanding of Christ’s death and resurrection), became a zealous and passionate apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, as seen in the book of Acts. Though Peter failed once, His Saviour and Lord did not allow him to fall away.

Conclusion

To the Christian who is wrestling with his own failings, how sweet are these words of Christ: “I have prayed for thee”. Moments of spiritual weakness and failures are not the end of our faith. Though we may feel cast down and despondent, there is still hope because Christ holds our faith secure. We will never be snatched out of our Saviour’s hands. Even in times of failures, we can find restoration in Christ, who was “wounded... (and) bruised for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5), and “by whose stripes (we) were healed... (and) are now returned (and restored)” (1 Peter 2:24-25). How, like the restored Peter, grateful we are to be pulled out from the depths of despair, to be strengthened and to be made useful in service again! ■



TRAVESTY IN PILATE'S JUDGMENT HALL

Ho Kee How



It has been rightly said that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the climax of history. It was at the Cross that the consummate purpose of God's sending forth of "his Son, made of a woman, made under the law" (Galatians 4:4) was fulfilled and His people's redemption effected. Ironically, the Cross might not have earned a pivotal place in history had it not been for one of the most inept and contradictory administering of judgment ever seen. That poignant moment was captured in the Roman governor Pontius Pilate's handling (or rather, mishandling) of Jesus.

We read in the gospels that after "having examined him... (and) found no fault in (Jesus), ...Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they (the chief priests and the rulers and the people) required" (Luke 23:14, 24), that Jesus "might be crucified" (Luke 23:23)! He knew Jesus was innocent and "that the chief priests had delivered him for envy" (Mark 15:10), and yet ended up having him "scourged... (and) delivered... to be crucified" (Matthew 27:26). This smacked of a lack of judicial independence, an undue regard for self-interest, and a mindless pandering to mob-rule. The result was the greatest miscarriage of justice of all time!

It must be noted that any trial that could ever condemn the perfect Son of God had to be an unfair trial. Yet the sovereign God is never taken by surprise. He used man's wrath to bring up His praise (Psalm 76:10), for through Pilate's callous (and obviously intimidated), though somewhat reluctant, condemnatory sentence, Jesus was "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23), as the ransom which would satisfy the demands of God's justice in order to secure man's redemption.

Incrimination of Man of Great Authority

Be that as it may, Pontius Pilate, in his reprehensible abdication of judicial responsibility, was not absolved from ultimate blame. He, being vested with executive powers by the state regarding issues of capital punishment, was a man of great authority. In his own words, he had "power to crucify... and... power to release" (John 19:10). Yet by condemning a "just person" (Matthew 27:24b) in whom he could "find... no fault at all" (John 18:38b), he blatantly incriminated himself and stood condemned before the Judge of all the earth. The way he conducted the trial of Jesus was a sham and shamefully showed up his preoccupation with personal advantage at the expense of Christ's honour, and inordinate fear of men over fear of God.

At the very least, as judge presiding over a trial, Pilate was supposed to weigh the accusers' allegations and the defendant's counter-presentations circumspectly and impartially, before coming up with a properly-considered and judiciously-deliberated verdict of judgment. Instead, what transpired was Pilate going out of his way to avoid offending the masses (namely the Jewish leaders and people), even to the extent of being "willing to content the people" (Mark 15:15a). By capitulating to the loud and vehement crowd's demand to release a notorious and convicted murderer in place of Jesus (Mark 15:8, 11), Pilate demonstrated that he regarded men's warped views about Christ as the self-deluded and self-acclaimed "King of the Jews" (Luke 23:2-3) more than Christ's own infallible testimony of Himself as the Messiah and Truth-bearer (John 18:36-37). To him, Christ was just a mere man,

though a righteous one, which he (and even his wife) had to admit (Matthew 27:19a, 24b). But like most pragmatic Roman rulers (who had a low view of human life), a man was just a “digit” that could easily be sacrificed for political gains. He knew he needed the backing of the Jewish masses to maintain his popularity and peaceful governing among the people in the region of Judaea. To lose their support would be disastrous politically, but to let Jesus die was a less painful option. After all, Christ’s death would make no difference as it would mean little to him. It would merely be another statistic to be added in his “Department of State Executions”!

In contrast to his low view of Christ’s life and an even dimmer perspective of Christ’s death (which he thought he had power over), Pilate harboured an unduly high regard for men’s honour. He had a knack of playing to the gallery with his public display of mock anguish (Luke 23:22; Matthew 27:24) and a series of feigned rhetorical questions (Matthew 27:21-23). All his antics were calculated to appease the pressure groups of the day. In a sense, this wily politician’s self-serving cultivation of his political advantage was not unlike the political pragmatists in many modern liberal countries who pander to pro-abortion, pro-gay and suchlike lobbies, to the perversion of justice and the undermining of societal well-being.

In short, his total disregard for the life (let alone death) of the righteous Christ so long as his self-interest is well served, was most incriminating. It revealed him to be a political opportunist through and through, not an upholder of the law as was his commissioned responsibility.

Injustice against Man of Ultimate Authority

Blinded by his conceited self-importance, Pilate failed to realize that Christ was not just a mere man; He was “the only begotten Son (of God) made flesh” (John 1:14, 18)! Pilate could not in his wildest dreams fathom God’s exceeding great power which would raise Christ “from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:20). In Christ’s exaltation (upon His resurrection), He would be elevated to His pre-eminent place of authority and honour due unto Him because of His deity. He is to reign over all kings, governors, rulers, principalities and powers; all things will be put under His feet, for He is head over all things (Ephesians 1:21-22), though at that finite point in time at Pilate’s court, He willingly subjected Himself to the limitations of His human body and status. Yet it could not belie the fact that as Head of the universe and the heavenlies, He indeed has the ultimate authority!

That must have been what Jesus intimated when He pierced Pilate’s aura of authority (amidst his threat of capital punishment) with a penetrating observation: “Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above” (John 19:11). Pilate, being so full of himself and obsessed with the power hierarchy of Roman rule, could not have appreciated that all earthly powers are “of God: (for) the powers that be are ordained of God” (Romans 13:1), and that he was also “a man under authority” (Matthew 8:9a). Though somewhat visibly shaken, he eventually caved in to the mob’s demand when they invoked Caesar’s name. This clearly betrayed his fear of the Roman emperor’s sweeping powers, which took precedence over any consideration for Christ’s life.

Pilate's light esteem of the consequence of Christ's death was plain to see right from the outset. How he, a man of delegated (not innate, and therefore accountable) authority, discharged his legal duty, was the epitome of injustice. Though "the chief priests accused him (Jesus) of many things... he answered nothing" (Mark 15:3), so much so that Pilate was bemused and confounded

by His composed demeanour. Really, Jesus, as it were, had "no case to answer"! In any case, Jesus, as sin-bearer on men's behalf, was fulfilling Scripture, being "oppressed, ... yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7). Notwithstanding, what any responsible judge should have done was to corroborate and verify the charges with authenticating evidence and credible testimonies of witnesses. But the way the case was summarily "wrapped up", without even the semblance of a fair hearing, was downright scandalous and went against every civilised notion of justice! Alas, Pilate, a man of great authority, effectively drove a nail in his own coffin by subjecting the guiltless (nay, sinless) Man of ultimate authority to such travesty of justice and, finally, to an ignominious treatment reserved for a condemned criminal.

Conclusion

In his inexcusable and dastardly abdication of responsibility, Pontius Pilate had consigned himself to the "hall of infamy" (together with Pharaoh, Haman, Nero, Hitler and the like) in the annals of human history. He will forever be known in history as the Roman governor of Judaea who had ordered the crucifixion of the Saviour of the world. In unfairly judging and wrongfully sentencing the Judge of all the earth, Pilate's doom was sealed. He chose the fear of men and not God while at the height of his temporal power. In not giving the Son of God the rightful honour, not to mention the right to proper judicial proceedings, Pilate would not be able to "stand in the judgment". Rather, he would in due time experience what "a fearful thing (it is) to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31)! ■



THE CENTURION'S PROFOUND DECLARATION

Ho Kee How

One of the foremost things that should strike Christians is that God made no mistake when He sent His only begotten Son into the world in 5 BC, during the days of the Roman Empire. According to Galatians 4:4, it was “when the fulness of the time was come”, not a moment too early nor a moment too late. Closer contemplation of certain historical facts regarding the Roman Empire would cause us to feel awestruck at God’s inscrutably “perfect” timing.

One profound observation on the Roman times, though a morbid one, is their mode of execution, namely crucifixion – arguably the most horrendous and excruciating form of capital punishment – which struck home the fact that Scripture must be fulfilled. Had the Messiah come in the reign



of the Babylonians, who threw condemned criminals to the fiery furnace, Christ's would have been a "bloodless" death. But without the shedding of blood, there can be no remission of sins (Hebrews 9:22). Had it been during the Persian Empire, when execution was in the form of being thrown into the lions' den, Christ's bones would have been crushed. But "that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken" (John 19:36). God had foreordained that Christ should die on that rugged cross under the iron-fisted, ruthless Roman rule, being pierced at His hands and feet to be hanged on the cross, and thereby suffering a cruel, agonising death. He was later to be pierced at His side by one of the soldiers (who apparently wanted to make doubly sure of death), blood and water flowing out as a result (John 19:34). How else is Revelation 1:7 going to be fulfilled? "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him..." It truly stuns us to realize that every portion of Scripture is and will be fulfilled, right down to the minutest detail!

Thrust into the forefront of this historically significant and dramatic scene was an unwitting Roman centurion, "chosen", as it were, to orchestrate the proceedings of this darkest chapter of human history. The man, who was tasked to oversee the crucifixion at Golgotha on that fateful day after the Passover, thought he was merely carrying out his duty as commander in charge of the execution squad for that day. What was expected to be just another "routine execution" as part of "all in a day's work" turned out to be a never-to-be-forgotten day for this centurion. This hardened, unfeeling chief executioner, who must have witnessed and supervised not a few crucifixions before, would at the end of his "duty" be left shaken to the core, fearing

greatly (Matthew 27:54) and even glorifying God (Luke 23:47), after watching Jesus die.

Humanly Unbearable Torment on the Cross

The centurion was deeply stirred, not because he was traumatised by the inhumane suffering inflicted on those hanging on the crosses. He had been through all that torturous, cruel scene before, complete with the accompanying bloodcurdling screams and shrieks. To be sure, Christ was put through a most horrendous death, enduring all that physical agony and horror on the cross for six excruciating hours. For "it was the third hour, and they crucified him... And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice,... and gave up the ghost" (Mark 15:25, 34, 37). The "seasoned" centurion knew how humanly unbearable the sheer torment of being nailed to the cross (through the outstretched wrists and extended feet) would be. Human muscles would be pushed beyond their endurance.

As one Christian medical expert put it, as the arms fatigued, great waves of cramps would sweep over the muscles. With these cramps would come the inability to push oneself upward. The body's full weight would be exerted on the nail through the feet, with the resultant searing agony of the nail tearing through the nerves. Hours of this limitless joint-rending cramps would culminate in a deep crushing pain deep in the chest as the compressed heart struggled to pump blood into the tissues, and the tortured lungs made a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. The usual crucifixion death was by suffocation, though heart failure could also occur. Without a doubt, crucifixion is one of the most ghastly deaths ever invented by man!

Humanly Unexplainable Behaviour on the Cross

Despite all these, what transpired on Jesus' cross was "out-of-this-world", to say the least, to the onlooking centurion. The behaviour he observed on that cross was totally unprecedented. The jeering and taunting of the bloodthirsty crowd (Mark 15:29-32) was what he had observed many times before. He knew how hard-hearted men in an unruly, stirred-up mob could be. Even the cursing and swearing of those condemned on the cross at each other was not unexpected. We see in Matthew 27:44: "The thieves also, which were crucified with (Christ), cast the same in his teeth (that is, hurled abuses at Christ)"! Yet, the first words Jesus uttered on the cross were: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). The centurion could not believe his ears! When one of the thieves, subsequently being pricked in his conscience, rebuked the other and appealed to Jesus to "remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom", Jesus had no hesitation in reassuring him, "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43). To bother at all to speak words of comfort and eternal hope to a fellow dying man hung on an adjacent cross, while one was in the same state of torture, defied all human logic!

Upon uttering his seventh and last cry, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit", Jesus "gave up the ghost" (Luke 23:46). This signified that it was Jesus Himself who willingly laid down His life, showing that He indeed had "power to lay it down" and, by the same token, would also "have power to take it again" (John 10:18). This last "act" of Jesus did not go unnoticed by the centurion (Mark 15:44-45) – for it was Jesus Himself who

determined the exact timing of His death, while the two thieves (and most "victims" of the cross) had to have their legs broken (John 19:32-33) to render them unable to support themselves with their legs, and thereby to succumb quickly to suffocation. Immediately thereafter, "the earth did quake, and the rocks rent" (Matthew 27:51b). This unnatural and ominous geological upheaval greatly frightened the centurion and his soldiers who were with him. Having earlier been astounded by the inexplicable self-control with which Jesus "endured (the shame and suffering of) the cross" and "such contradiction of sinners against himself" (Hebrews 12:2b, 3a), coupled with His prayer for His enemies, the centurion could not help but declare: "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39b). Imagine what fear must have struck his heart upon realising that he had just put a righteous man, nay even the Son of God, on the cross!

Humanly Unfathomable Declaration at the Cross

By exclaiming those sombre yet majestic words portraying Christ's deity, the centurion was in effect confessing that the Son of God "is come in the flesh" (1 John 4:2). No doubt he must have been so deeply moved in his spirit. It could very well be that "flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto (him), but (the) Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). It was therefore no wonder that his heartfelt utterance glorified God. Imagine what that would mean. That would imply that the centurion was on the verge of grasping "the mystery of godliness", namely "God... manifest in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16)!

Scripture has foretold that to be made righteousness for mankind, Christ had to suffer the punishment on man's behalf as

the ransom that satisfies the demands of God's justice. Now we know that without shedding of blood, there can be no remission of sins. Someone has to die a cursed and bloody death. That "Someone" has to be spotless and unblemished, i.e. sinless. Who is sinless but God? But God, by virtue of His being, cannot die; and being a Spirit, has no blood! The only way to save us is for God to become man Himself in order that He might be "made under the law" (Galatians 4:4) to obey it, and that He could suffer its death penalty. He must both pacify God's wrath and remove the enmity between God and man. Oh, what unfathomable mystery – He has to be "God manifest in the flesh"!

A Profound Thought

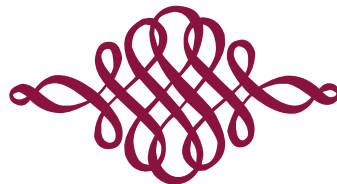
We may not have been like the Roman centurion and the soldiers in physically putting Jesus on the cross, but spiritually, we are no less guilty of His blood. In effect, the Roman centurion and his execution squad, in carrying out their state-sanctioned duty, represented us – sinners who lived before and sinners who lived after Jesus' crucifixion. It is our sins that had caused our loving Saviour to willingly be nailed to that cruel cross as the ransom that would satisfy God's law and justice. In other words, sins of all men throughout the ages were hung together, as it were, on the cross when Christ, the God-man, in becoming "obedient unto death" (Philippians 2:8), stood in our place to suffer the death penalty as the ultimate sacrifice. No wonder that heart-rending cry from the dying Saviour on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). For a brief moment in time, which is equivalent to an eternity to the sinless Son of God, God the Father poured out His wrath on the sin-bearer for all mankind. "For (God) hath made

(Christ) to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Conclusion

Those few hours of watching Jesus die would be deeply etched in the memory of the centurion at the foot of the cross. No mere man had ever died like this, for all men had succumbed to the terror and "fear of death... (through which they were) subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:15). To the centurion, it was thus an awesome and awe-inspiring sight to behold Jesus, "who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to (the Father) that judgeth righteously" (1 Peter 2:23). He rightly concluded that only the Son of God could die triumphantly like this.

The thief on the cross had gone to paradise with Christ; the centurion was just one small step from paradise had he truly realised the full implication of his profound declaration about Christ. Dear reader, how about you? If you, like the thief, realise your utter sinfulness, and like the centurion, recognise Jesus as the sinless Son of God, and humbly accept through faith, Christ as your Saviour who had died to take away your sins, then one day, you too shall be with Him in paradise. ■





COMING OUT^{INTO} THE OPEN AT THE CROSS

Prabhudas Koshy

According to the Gospel of John, two men played an active role in lowering Christ's body from the cross, preparing His body for burial and finally entombing it in "a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid" (John 19:41; cf. Luke 23:53). Their names are disclosed – Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus. John refers to Joseph of Arimathaea as a secret disciple (John 19:38) and describes Nicodemus as one who "came to Jesus by night" (John 19:39; cf. 3:1-2; 7:50). Casting off all secrecy about their faith and love for Christ, both sought to bury Christ upon His death. It is remarkable that they boldly came forward to take down the body of Christ from the cross for burial, when those

who had followed Him openly (including His own eleven disciples) chose to stay away from His cross. Their extraordinary decision to openly associate with the crucified Christ at a time when Jewish hostility had been whipped into a frenzy, is worthy of our solemn contemplation.

They were Jewish Leaders

Joseph is mentioned by all the four Gospel writers (Matthew 27:57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-54; John 19:38-42). He "was of Arimathaea, a city of the Jews" (Luke 23:51), which was situated 20 miles (about 32 km) north-west of Jerusalem on the border between Judea and Samaria. He

was an eminent Jew who probably held a distinguished Jewish office, as Mark 15:43 refers to him as “an honourable counsellor”. While the word “counsellor” identifies him as a member of the council or Sanhedrin, the word “honourable” denotes that he was a widely-respected leader of the Jews. He was also a wealthy man (Matthew 27:57).

Nicodemus, who “came to Jesus by night”, was “a man of the Pharisees” and “a ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1; 7:48-50). The word “ruler” indicates that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin too. On that “night”, Jesus taught him the necessity of being born again to enter the kingdom of God. It is not known whether he believed on Christ that night. However, in the incident recorded in John 7:48-52, Nicodemus appeared to have genuine sympathy for Christ when he demanded that Christ should not be condemned without a fair trial in accordance with the law. Apart from this, we have no other record of Nicodemus’ faith or public show of commitment to Christ during Christ’s public ministry. Like Joseph of Arimathea, his faith remained largely obscure.

They were Secret Disciples

John stated that Joseph of Arimathea was “a disciple of Jesus Christ, but secretly” (John 19:38). He also mentioned the reason why he was a “secret disciple” – “for fear of the Jews”. The “Jews” whom he feared were the hostile unbelieving Jews, particularly the Jewish religious leaders who were plotting to kill Jesus. John, in his gospel account, had taken great pains to highlight the murderous hatred of the Jews by repeatedly recording their secret plots (John 5:16, 18; 7:1, 19, 25; 8:37, 40; 10:39). The gospel-writer Luke also wrote: “And they were filled with madness; and communed one with another what they might do to Jesus” (Luke 6:11). Matthew further recorded

that “the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him” (Matthew 12:14; cf. 26:59).

Joseph and Nicodemus, being members of the council of the Jews, certainly had known the evil resentment of the Jewish leaders against Christ, though they were among some in the council who sympathised with Christ but dared not confess Him. John had harsh words concerning those who chose to be silent for fear of the Jewish leaders. He wrote, “Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:42-43). Unapologetically, John denounced them as man-pleasing rather than God-pleasing.

When Joseph came out into the open for Christ’s sake, John was happy to call him “a disciple of Jesus Christ”, though he mentioned Joseph’s past secrecy due to his fear of the Jews. Concerning Nicodemus, John mentioned his past covert act of coming to Jesus by night. From John’s cordial tone, it seems that he was pleased that these two men had finally abandoned their inexcusable covert behaviour. John must have felt glad that they had shed their cowardice and become open about their conviction of Christ as the Messiah whom God has sent to be the Saviour of His people. Yet their conduct before Christ’s death was unworthy of emulation. Fear of man, which stops one from confessing publicly one’s faith in Christ, is abominable and displeasing to God. If anyone sincerely wishes to be Christ’s disciple, he should cast off the fear of man. Proverbs 29:25 warns us: “The fear of man bringeth a snare.” Jesus reassures us, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

No true disciple can live long as a “secret disciple”. He who withdraws himself from Christ cannot be His witness nor hear Him speak His glorious divine truths. A withdrawn disciple will forfeit the privilege of innumerable glorious experiences of His presence and power. What a shame it was that Joseph and Nicodemus had missed countless opportunities to learn great spiritual truths personally from the blessed lips of the Saviour and to witness His glorious power through His many signs and wonders! Blessings lost in time are blessings lost irrecoverably!

Moreover, the commitment of one who hides his faith in Christ is questionable. No assurance is offered to him who refuses to come out into the open as a disciple. Only a damning caution to any who refuses to confess publicly his faith in Christ – “For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father’s, and of the holy angels” (Luke 9:26).

So, let everyone who loves Christ root out the fear of man from his heart, and come out into the open to confess his faith in Him. Otherwise, it is a disgrace to even think he is a disciple. A disciple who is a coward is nothing but an awful failure; a disciple who is in hiding is nothing but a lamp under the bushel; and a disciple who will not confess Christ is nothing but tasteless salt!

They Came Out into the Open for Christ

As soon as the Lord Jesus died on the cross, both men were emboldened in their hearts to openly display their affection for Him. All through the three and a half years of Jesus’ public ministry, they had remained secretive about their faith in Him. How remarkable it was that when most men (who openly followed the Lord

earlier) deserted Him, they found courage to come forward as His disciples!

They showed no hesitation, only determination and courage in their vivid expression of their faith in the crucified Lord. The gospel-writer Mark noted that Joseph of Arimathea “went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus” (Mark 15:43). What was it about the cross of Christ that propelled these men out of their timidity and secretiveness? How did that gruesome picture of Christ’s utter humiliation and suffering instil in them the boldness to come out for Christ? According to Mark, Joseph of Arimathea was one who “waited for the kingdom of God”. In other words, with great expectancy he looked for the Messiah (or Christ) to arrive and establish the kingdom of God. He was like the Old Testament prophets who “have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come... Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow” (1 Peter 1:10-11).

In Nicodemus was also manifested a holy curiosity about Jesus; it brought him to Christ by night. In that meeting, unlike other rulers of the Jews, he gave great honour to Christ, saying, “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2). On another occasion, when the chief priests and Pharisees met together and sought to condemn Christ, Nicodemus insisted that justice be served according to the law, and that none be condemned without a fair trial. To which they challenged him, saying, “out of Galilee ariseth no prophet” (John 7:52). The Pharisees’ fallacious assumption that Christ was born in Galilee revealed their ignorance that Jesus was born in Bethlehem according to the Scriptures.

Although many Jews anticipated the arrival of Christ, they did not recognise Jesus as the Christ. They refused all the Messianic claims of Jesus. They branded His miracles as demonic (Matthew 12:24). All the evidence pointing to Jesus as the Christ was completely ignored. Joseph and Nicodemus, though intimidated by the unreceptive and hostile majority, could not in their hearts deny all the evidence that Jesus is the Christ. Neither could they agree with the unjust dealings against Christ.

Despite being in the Sanhedrin with the Jewish rulers, such as the chief priests, scribes and elders in the high priest's palace, Joseph and Nicodemus did not agree with the unjust verdict to put Christ to death. Luke recorded, concerning Joseph, that "The same had not consented to the counsel and deed of them" (Luke 23:51). How could Joseph, who was referred to as "a good man, and a just", ever consent to such injustice? As they stood in bewilderment at the injustice and cruelty dished out to Jesus at His crucifixion, their hearts must have been deeply convicted (by Christ's just and meek response) that He is the Christ, the Saviour. It was Christ suffering in His flesh for the sins of His people, the just for the unjust. As Isaiah prophesied, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:4-6).

Joseph and Nicodemus needed no other argument to leave the company of the Jewish rulers and take their stand for Christ, the crucified. The sight of Christ's sufferings on the cross compelled them to

come out and express their love for Him. At last, at the foot of the cross of Calvary, they banished all their fears and doubt, and manifested their love for Him openly.

Joseph boldly went to Pilate, the Roman governor, and sought his permission to take down Jesus' body from the cross. John recorded their solemn act of burying Jesus thus: "He came... and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus,... and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore... for the sepulchre was nigh at hand" (John 19:38-42).

Christ was honoured by Joseph and Nicodemus with their very best – a mixture of spices made up of a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, fine linen to wrap His body, and a new sepulchre in a garden. They gave what were most suitable for the King of heaven, unlike the enemies who mocked and crucified Him. They did not want His body to remain an object of derision on that cross, so they buried Him with reverence. Thus, with the most poignant of sentiments, they laid Him in the garden tomb.

Conclusion

What is your sentiment towards Christ who died on the cross? Let us bid farewell to all abhorrent feelings in our hearts that keep us away from the Lord Jesus Christ. Let nothing in this world make us ashamed to be openly identified with Him. "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Galatians 6:14). ■

BIBLE TRIVIA - EXODUS 19

Sarah Yong

Read the chapter from your Bible. Choose the best answer from each bracket and underline it as shown in the example below.

In the ¹ [(J) first (K) second (L) third] month of their journey in the wilderness, the Israelites came to the desert of ² [(E) Sin (I) Sinai (U) Zin] and pitched their tents. The LORD called unto Moses out of the ³ [(H) bush (K) cloud (S) mountain] and said to Moses that if the people obeyed His ⁴ [(D) prophet (T) voice (Y) warning], they would be a peculiar ⁵ [(B) people (C) race (E) treasure] unto God. They would also be a kingdom of priests and ⁶ [(N) an holy (P) a righteous (U) a strong] nation. The people were to wash their ⁷ [(A) clothes (I) faces (O) hands] and be ready when the LORD descended on Mount ⁸ [(G) Horeb (N) Sinai (R) Zion]. They were instructed to set ⁹ [(D) bounds (M) a distance (V) a measure] which they were not to cross or they would be ¹⁰ [(O) killed (R) punished (W) scolded]. The LORD came down upon the mount in ¹¹ [(A) a cloud (B) fire (C) mist] and the voice of the ¹² [(C) horn (D) timbrel (E) trumpet] sounded long and loud. The LORD then called Moses to the ¹³ [(G) base (P) middle (Y) top] of the mount.



What must a child of God always be ready to do?

(Hint: From the underlined answers above, take the letters in the brackets and write them down in order, into the blanks below.)

L _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

God speaks to us today through His written Word, the Holy Scriptures. May we as children of God be eager to read the Bible, and keep it in our hearts that we may not sin against Him.

ANSWERS TO VOLUME 14 ISSUE 1: BIBLE TRIVIA - EXODUS 17 & 18 (PP.23)

1. commandment 2. thirsted 3. Horeb 4. elders 5. rock 6. Meribah 7. Rephidim 8. Moses
9. steady 10. blessed 11. greater 12. morning 13. ordinances 14. rulers 15. truth

The meaning of "Jehovah-nissi" is "THE LORD MY BANNER"



The Story of Fiddler Joss

Retold by Ruth Low
Illustrated by Linus Kok

Sources: "Men of Destiny" by Peter Masters and "The Life of Joshua Poole" by Joshua Poole

Joshua Poole was born in England on 24th April 1826. He lived a terrible life of drinking and drunkenness that led to many evils and sorrows which hurt him and his family. In this story, you will see the stronghold of sin being overcome by the wonderful love and power of the Lord Jesus Christ who transformed a life almost destroyed by godless living. Is there anyone whom God cannot change?



Poole was an entertainer who earned his wages by playing his violin for people in beer-shops and places of celebration. He was so well known for his violin-playing that he was nicknamed "Fiddler Joss". But instead of using his money for food and other necessities, Poole foolishly spent it all on drinking.

At the age of twenty-two, he married a girl called Jane Mellor who gave birth to a baby girl. Because of his



drinking addiction, Poole did nothing to support his wife and daughter, coming home every night empty-handed and drunk. When Jane contracted tuberculosis, he could barely help nor comfort her as he was never sober enough. So Jane's condition worsened until one night, she died in bed, starved, lonely and heartbroken. Poole hardly knew that she had died, being in a drunken stupor. A week later, their daughter also died. Poole was left lonely, sad and ashamed of himself, but this did not cause him to change the slightest bit. In fact, he was dead bent on plunging once more into his wasteful life of drinking!

After a few months, Poole married another lady, Mary. For a week into his second marriage, he remained sober, not even touching a drop of strong drink. However, he soon returned to his addiction. When he suffered a serious illness, he began to beg God for mercy and forgiveness. However, there was no true change in him, for he was hardly ever sober for the next seven years! He was not even fully aware when Mary gave birth to their first son. Poole only got worse with time, even turning violent on his own father by punching him, and his own sister by dragging her by her hair.



Poole had another son with Mary, but still he did not care for them. Their home was a dark, rented cellar below street level, and it was so bare that they had only sacks for beds. While Poole played his violin and spent his money drinking with his friends, his wife begged on the streets. Sadly, within two months, both their sons died from ill health. By



the time of her second son's passing, Mary herself was so weak and worn that she had to struggle to find help and money for the burial. After sorrowfully laying her son in a pauper's coffin and committing him to the ground, she returned to the nightmarish cellar where there was still no bed, food or fire. Oh, the cruelty and snare of drinking!



In spite of the loss of her sons, Mary later

gave birth to two girls. But her drunkard-

husband remained unrepentant. In fact, his drunkenness had turned him into a savage, murderous man who in his raving madness, had attempted to kill Mary on several occasions.

So Mary had to destroy every sharp object from the room for fear of Poole using them as weapons in his anger. She even had to spend nights sleeping outside on the pavement with a child in each arm. Finally, she gave in to the persuasion by others to

leave Poole and report him to the police, or she might just die in his hands. Thus, Poole was

arrested. But he was so angry and bitter that for the first nine months of his imprisonment, he hatched a plan to murder Mary and the children, and then end his own life...

Read the rest of the story in the next issue!





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