

The Day that Christ Died

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Introduction

CHRIST SPENT HIS EARLY YEARS IN THE SECLUSION OF NAZARETH IN Galilee, that the prophetic scripture might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazarene” (Matthew 2:23). There He grew up and was known as ‘the carpenter’ (Mark 6:3). It was a town with an unsavoury reputation, even among Galileans. There was, however, a godly remnant in Israel searching the Scriptures, with expectancy for the coming Messiah. One such was Philip of Bethsaida. He found his friend Nathanael, saying to him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael replied, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip replied “Come and see” (John 1:45–46).

At about thirty years of age Christ came south to the river Jordan, where He was baptised by his forerunner, John the Baptist. John had prepared the way for Christ, “preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:1–2). As He was being baptised by John, the Holy Spirit “descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, ‘You are

my beloved Son; in You I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). John adds “and He remained upon Him” (John 1:32).

This was followed by His temptation in the wilderness, from which he emerged triumphant, the devil departing from him ‘until an opportune time.’ Christ returned again to Galilee, to begin His preaching in the synagogues. At Nazareth, “where He had been brought up,” in God’s perfect timing He was handed the reading for that week in the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, in our Bibles Isaiah 61:1–2:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me; because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, To preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18–19).

He applied the prophecy to Himself, with the words “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Though the “gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth” were acknowledged (Luke 4:22), the response of the people as a whole was not like the friendlier reception in Cana and Capernaum. They were looking for more signs. He referred them to the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Elijah showed his divine authority by shutting off the rain for three and a half years. The only person to receive benefit from Elijah’s ministry in those years was a Gentile widow from Zarephath in Sidon. Elisha was sent from God, but Israel did not believe the words of the prophet and look to him for help. The only one to receive help from Elisha’s ministry was another Gentile, Naaman the leper, a Syrian. What Christ was saying is that the people of Nazareth were like the Israelites in former days. Only if they turned to Him in faith would they receive benefit from His ministry (Luke 4:23–27). Luke records how the episode ended:

Then all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up, and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way (Luke 4:28-9).

Dwight Pentecost commented on this: "The reception afforded Christ in the synagogue of Nazareth provided a glimpse of the reception which the nation was to give him in the days ahead. They listened to His words and then rejected His claims. They would put Him to death in an effort to escape His condemnation."¹

Throughout His public ministry Christ repeatedly faced the opposition of the Jewish leaders, though the common people heard Him gladly (Mark 12:37). On several occasions they tried to stone Him. John records their hostility: "Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because he not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18). When He healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, the Pharisees "took counsel against Him, how they might destroy Him" (Matthew 12:14; Mark 3:6). During His early ministry in Jerusalem their intention to kill Him was so obvious and well known that Christ was referred to as "He whom they seek to kill" (John 7:25). Their determination to have Christ arrested and tried is brought out clearly in the words of Luke: "So they watched Him, and sent spies, who pretended to be righteous, that they might seize on His words, in order to deliver Him to the power and the authority of the governor" (Luke 20:20). Just days before His arrest and trial Christ had raised Lazarus from the dead at Bethany. This caused a sensation throughout Judea. The reaction of the Pharisees and chief priests, however, was that He should

be put to death, which they extended also to Lazarus (John 11:53; 12:10).

In spite of the continued opposition of the Jewish leaders, Christ proclaimed faithfully the message His Father had given Him. Like John the Baptist He called the people to repentance. Constantly Christ was directing people to Himself away from the traditions of men and their attention to mere external observances: “Most assuredly, I say to you, He who hears My word, and believes in Him who sent Me, has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but is passed from death into life” (John 5:24). Central to His ministry were those great ‘I am’ sayings, in which He pointed to Himself as the source of all their needs: as the bread of life (John 6:35); the light of the world (John 8:12); the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep (John 10:11); the resurrection and the life (John 11:25–26); the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

The Old Testament is full of Christ, in types, psalms and prophecies. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that on the day He died up to sixty prophetic Scriptures were fulfilled. Several of these will be noted as they occur in the following pages.

What might not be so readily appreciated is the fact that in the proceedings of that day, a sovereign God was in control of events and also behind the punishment of His Son. For example, it had been prophesied of Christ seven centuries earlier by Isaiah:

“... Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God and afflicted ... the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all ... Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; he has put Him to grief” (Isaiah 53:4,6,10).

God was also in control with regard to the timing of the death of Christ. Christ could say to the Pharisees and others, in the ‘good shepherd’ chapter of John’s Gospel:

“Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received of My Father” (John 10:17–18).

Christ often spoke of His coming death as His ‘hour’, everything in his life being a preparation for this (John 2:4; 7:6, 30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). This He foreknew and made known to His disciples on several occasions (e.g. Matthew 17:22–23). His control of events can be seen in the way the chief priests wanted Him disposed of, “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people” (Matthew 26:3–5). In the Upper Room, however, Christ forced the issue of the timing of his death by saying to Judas, after indicating He knew who would betray Him, “What you do, do quickly” (John 13:27). This meant that Judas now had to act. It also meant that the Jewish rulers’ plan to get rid of Christ secretly, without legal procedure and after the feast of Passover was past to avoid uproar among the people, was no longer possible:

The cross is therefore the ultimate proof of the utter sovereignty of God. His purposes are always fulfilled in spite of the evil intention of sinners ... Furthermore, if God was sovereignly in control when the unlawful hands of murderous men put His Son on a cross, why would anyone balk at the notion that God is still sovereignly in control even when lesser evils occur? The Cross therefore establishes God’s absolute sovereignty beyond question.²