

ONE

THE CONSPIRACY



The philosopher Plato once imagined what would happen if a perfect man ever came to live on this imperfect planet. The kind of person Plato had in mind would be “a just man in his simplicity and nobleness,” willing to hold on to his “course of justice unwavering to the point of death.” The great philosopher could well imagine what would happen to such a man in this wicked world: “Our just man will be thrown into prison, scourged and racked, will have his eyes burnt out, and, after every kind of torment, be impaled.”<sup>1</sup>

Without realizing it, Plato described Jesus of Nazareth, also called Christ. For Jesus was a just man, a man of noble simplicity who maintained his justice to the point of death.

And he was treated the way Plato expected. Jesus was arrested, tortured, and executed. Furthermore, Jesus was put to death in precisely the manner Plato indicated. He was impaled on a tree; or, as the custom was in those days, he was crucified.

Jesus was treated shamefully. The only perfect man who ever lived was physically abused and brutally murdered. From a legal standpoint, the whole thing was a travesty, the greatest miscarriage of justice in the history of the world. Yet, strangely, it was all done in the name of justice. Jesus was professionally arrested, formally tried, judicially condemned, and officially executed. When Jesus was put on trial, many of the proper legal procedures were followed. The question is, Where did it all go wrong? How did an innocent man end up dying like a common criminal?

#### IN THE PALACE OF CAIAPHAS

Before the trial of Jesus, there was a conspiracy. The whole sordid, scandalous affair began with a perverse group of men who were jealous of Jesus: “Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. ‘But not during the Feast,’ they said, ‘or there may be a riot among the people’” (Matt. 26:3–5).

These conspirators were some of the most highly respected men in Jerusalem. The “chief priests” were religious leaders; probably they were the ones who “opened the meeting in prayer.” In a way, they were also lawyers—experts in God’s law. The “elders of the people” were the political leaders. They were members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jewish people. Together these priests and politicians formed an unholy alliance. Their aim was not simply to discredit Jesus but to do away with him altogether.

The proper legal term for the meeting they held in the palace of Caiaphas is “conspiracy.” According to the law of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, “A person is guilty of conspiracy with another person or persons to commit a crime if, with intent of promoting or facilitating its commission, he agrees . . . that . . . one or more of them will engage in conduct which constitutes such crime or . . . solicitation to commit such crime.”<sup>2</sup> These men did the latter. They solicited an assassination. Their intent was to commit murder, but Jerusalem was crowded with worshipers, and Jesus was much too popular to attack in public, so they needed to be discreet.

Their opportunity to act came from the most unexpected quarter. One of Jesus’ closest disciples, “one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and

asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?’” (Matt. 26:14–15a). The Jewish leaders probably would have paid almost anything to get their hands on Jesus. “So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over” (Matt. 26:15b–16). Thus Judas became the most infamous traitor in history, and the Son of God was sold for thirty pieces of silver.

Why did they do it? What was it about Jesus that led these men to hate him? It is not certain why Judas betrayed Jesus. He may have been disillusioned. Perhaps he was looking for a Messiah who would overthrow the Romans and bring the Jews back to political power. Or perhaps he was simply greedy. After all, Judas served as the treasurer for Jesus and his disciples. There was nothing he liked better than the sound of silver coins clinking together in his bag (John 12:5–6). Whatever the reason for his treachery, it was a total sellout.

In the case of the political leaders, it may have had something to do with Jesus’ popularity. Just a few days earlier, Jesus had entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Tens of thousands had lined the streets, waving palm branches and welcoming him as their rightful king. The elders knew that they could never hope to compete with

such a charismatic figure. Jesus was dangerous to them because he threatened their authority.

The religious leaders hated Jesus because he had a knack for exposing their secret sins. Whenever Jesus taught about hypocrisy, which was frequently, they had the sneaking suspicion that he was talking about them, and usually they were right about this (Matt. 21:45). They also hated Jesus because he claimed to be God. Since they refused to believe that he was the divine Lord, they thought that he was a false prophet, and in those days blasphemy was punishable in Jewish law by death (see Lev. 24:13–16). They were wrong, of course. Jesus really *was* God! If they needed proof, all they needed to do was witness his miracles, but they had already concluded that he was a fraud.

#### WHO'S TO BLAME?

It is an irrefutable fact of history that Jesus was brought to trial by the leaders of the Jewish faith. The men who hatched the conspiracy against him were among the highest ranking officials in Israel. It is also true that they took full responsibility for their own actions. Later, when the Roman governor tried to talk them out of having Jesus crucified, they said, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matt. 27:25).

Yet it would be a mistake to blame the Jews alone for the crucifixion. Much evil has come from the idea that “the Jews killed Jesus,” not least in Nazi Germany. Therefore, it is important to see how many other people were implicated in this conspiracy. An Idumean king named Herod handed Jesus over to the Romans. A Roman governor named Pontius Pilate ordered Jesus to be crucified. Roman soldiers carried out Pilate’s orders, nailing Jesus to a wooden cross and hanging him up to die. The Jews brought Jesus to trial, but in the end the Gentiles killed him.

These facts are significant because they show how the whole human race was implicated in the conspiracy against God’s one and only Son. The Jews could not have killed Jesus without the Gentiles, for they did not have the right under Roman law to execute capital punishment, even though their religious law could punish blasphemy with death. Nor would the Gentiles have considered killing him without the Jews, for they had no real quarrel with Jesus. From the conspiracy to the execution, the trial of Jesus depended on an unlikely coalition of Jews and Gentiles. In the words of Vinoth Ramachandra, “Jesus was condemned to death, not by the irreligious and the uncivilized, but by the highest representatives of Jewish religion and Roman law.”<sup>23</sup>

This shows that every one of us belongs to a sinful race. Are we any better than the men who put Jesus to death? “Not at all!” the Bible says. “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written:

‘There is no one righteous, not even one;  
there is no one who understands,  
no one who seeks God.  
All have turned away,  
they have together become worthless;  
There is no one who does good,  
not even one’” (Rom. 3:9–12).

If no one is righteous (not even one!) then we too are among the accused.

One man who understood his own personal rebellion against Christ was the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. In a dramatic moment in Bach’s *St. John Passion*, Jesus is struck by the servants of the high priest. This episode is recorded in the Bible: “They spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, ‘Prophesy to us, Christ. Who hit you?’” (Matt. 26:67–68). At this point it would have been customary for a composer—especially a German one—to blame the whole scene on the Jews. But Bach gave a different answer. He identified himself with sinful humanity.

“Who is it that has hit you?” the choir asks. “I, I and my sins,” is the response. Bach understood that, in a very real sense, it was his own sins that led Christ to suffer and to die.

The artist Stanley Spencer, who often painted biblical scenes set in his native English village, also understood this. In one painting Spencer gave a whole new perspective on the crucifixion. The cross itself is at the center of the painting, but it is viewed from behind, with the figure of Christ obscured. The viewer’s attention is drawn not to Christ himself but to those who are fixing him to the cross, carrying out the messy business of crucifixion. Who are the executioners? They are ordinary people from the artist’s hometown, wearing the grubby clothes and brewery caps of common laborers. The point of Spencer’s painting is that Jesus was crucified by ordinary people—sinners just like us.

Since every human being is a sinner, each one of us is implicated in the conspiracy against God’s Son. Are you willing to confess your own complicity? The poet Jacob Revius made his confession in the form of a sonnet entitled “He Bore Our Grievs”:

No, it was not the Jews who crucified,  
Nor who betrayed You in the judgment place,  
Nor who, Lord Jesus, spat into Your face,



Nor who with buffets struck You as You died.

No, it was not the soldiers fisted bold  
Who lifted up the hammer and the nail,  
Or raised the cursed cross on Calvary's hill,  
Or, gambling, tossed the dice to win Your robe.

I am the one, O Lord, who brought You there,  
I am the heavy cross You had to bear,  
I am the rope that bound You to the tree,

The whip, the nail, the hammer, and the spear,  
The blood-stained crown of thorns You had to wear:  
It was my sin, alas, it was for me.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY

The strangest thing of all is that God himself was in on the conspiracy. God not only allowed Jesus to be put on trial but also planned for him to be crucified. God knew that it was only through the atoning death of Jesus that sinners could find forgiveness and receive eternal life. Call it the “divine conspiracy”—a holy God conspiring to save guilty humanity.

When explaining the crucifixion, the first disciples made it clear that Jesus' death was part of God's plan. To the Jewish leaders who had Jesus killed, they said, “This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men [in other words, the Romans],

put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead. . . . God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:23–24, 36). The followers of Christ were not afraid to blame Jews and Gentiles alike for the wrongful death of God’s own Son, but they also emphasized the deeper conspiracy, that God was plotting to use their dastardly deed to accomplish his salvation.

Jesus was in on the conspiracy too. He said as much to his disciples. He said it almost casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world: “As you know,” Jesus said, “the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified” (Matt. 26:2). This was more than a prediction; it was a prophecy. The crucifixion was part of God’s plan for saving sinners, and Jesus was in on the plan. He knew that he would be “handed over”—that is to say, handed over by the Jews—“to be crucified” by the Romans. He also knew that his death would mean forgiveness and salvation for everyone who trusts in him.

Many of those who conspired against Jesus later discovered this for themselves. The moment Jesus died there was an earthquake, and the Roman soldiers who were guarding the cross said, “Surely he was the Son of God!” (Matt. 27:54). Many of the Jewish priests reached the same conclusion. Once Jesus was safely crucified, they assumed they would never have

to deal with him again. But they were wrong. Three days later Jesus rose from the dead, showing his disciples that he had conquered death once and for all. The Bible says that in the months after Jesus was raised, “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). Remarkable! Many of the Jews who had conspired to kill Jesus, as well as the Gentiles who actually crucified him, eventually came to worship Jesus as their God and Savior.

Jesus is just full of surprises. Put him to death, and he comes back to life. Conspire against him, seeking his death, and he will conspire against you, dying for your sins and then rising again to give you eternal life. Put Jesus on trial—if you dare! Try to decide if he measures up to your standards and you will discover that all the while *he* has been investigating *you*. Perhaps even now Jesus is plotting to bring you into a whole new relationship with him. The whole thing is a conspiracy!