

Jesus and the woman caught in adultery

JOHN 8v1-11

8 Then everyone went home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early the next morning he went back to the Temple. All the people gathered around him, and he sat down and began to teach them. ³ The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees brought in a woman who had been caught committing adultery, and they made her stand before them all. ⁴ "Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ In our Law Moses commanded that such a woman must be stoned to death. Now, what do you say?" ⁶ They said this to trap Jesus, so that they could accuse him. But he bent over and wrote on the ground with his finger. ⁷ As they stood there asking him questions, he straightened up and said to them, "Whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone at her." ⁸ Then he bent over again and wrote on the ground. ⁹ When they heard this, they all left, one by one, the older ones first. Jesus was left alone, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ He straightened up and said to her, "Where are they? Is there no one left to condemn you?" ¹¹ "No one, sir," she answered. "Well, then," Jesus said, "I do not condemn you either. Go, but do not sin again."

⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

⁵⁷ "You are not yet fifty years old," they said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!"

⁵⁸ "Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"⁵⁹ At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds

John 10v31-33

³¹ Then the people again picked up stones to throw at him. ³² Jesus said to them, "I have done many good deeds in your presence which the Father gave me to do; for which one of these do you want to stone me?"

³³ They answered, "We do not want to stone you because of any good deeds, but because of your blasphemy! You are only a man, but you are trying to make yourself God!"

OT Reading:- Isaiah 42v1-8

DEATH & STONING:

Death is close. Closer than we would like it to be. Sometime it totally comes by surprise, jumps out and takes some-one we know without warning. Other times we can see it coming from a long way off, surfing on a wave of fear, and then eventually the wave either takes the person out, or it breaks before it hits, you have escaped from death but are profoundly affected by the experience. How many of us have lost a friend or family member to death in the last two years, or know some-one who currently has a terminal illness, or you yourself at some point in your life had a close brush with death? Many.

Death is close. Closer than we would like it to be.

In the time of Jesus, death was a more frequent visitor than he is today with many mothers dying in childbirth, many other men and women dying early of diseases. Then if you did wrong, whilst debtors were imprisoned, must other wrong-doing seemed to be punishable by the death penalty, such as stoning.. Stoning or lapidation is a form of capital punishment whereby a group throws stones at a person until he or she dies. No individual among the group can be identified as the one who kills the subject. Slower than other forms of execution, stoning is regarded as a form of execution by [torture](#). We think of stoning as a biblical or medieval punishment but it has never gone away.

Stoning now

ISIS are currently stoning woman to death in Syria for adultery, but it is not the only country where there is evidence of recent stonings. It is a recognised punishment in Iran with government rules on how deep a man and woman should be buried, and on what size of stone you can throw. There are recent reports of stoning in Somalia, and in 2013 a mother of 2 was reportedly stoned in Pakistan for owning a mobile phone. There are formally organised stoning by authorities and mob stoning where local officials or groups take the law into their own hands, and it was no different in the time of Jesus.

Stoning then

The temple authority, the Sanhedrin, had the power to stone people but as a practice it was becoming frowned upon, and certainly in the decades after the death of Jesus, the Sanhedrin made it more and more difficult for a case of stoning to get through. However the law did still allow stoning for a number of sins ; the Old testament has stoning as a punishment for adultery (but both should be stoned) but also for other identified practices e.g. getting married and pretending you are a virgin, cursing God, being a wizard, worshipping idols and encouraging others to do so, but also for rebellion against parents (Deut 17) and

breaking the Sabbath rules (Numbers 15). Imagine if today we stoned everyone that did any work on a Sunday or were rude to their parents!

In the first Century Middle East, the formal method for stoning was first to push them off a height of two stories (higher enough to lame but not kill outright), then drop large boulders on their head. If still alive you would throw smaller stones at them until dead. Mobs might imitate this practice rather than just throwing stones, to perhaps try and legitimise what they were doing. When Jesus preached in his home synagogue at Nazareth, they got so angry with him Luke 4v29 says ²⁹ *They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.* Whilst called a cliff it is believed to have been fairly low, no higher than a 2 storey house. However it was high enough to damage him, with the intent to then stone him from above, but having been dragged up there, he walked back through the crowd unharmed.

Mob stoning was sometime unsuccessful as we see later in this chapter, when Jesus said he had not seen Abraham, but existed before him, using the phrase 'Before Abraham I am', meaning he was God. The Pharisees picked up stones to throw at him, but he escaped into the crowd, hid then left (John 8v59).

Jesus was never far from danger. Think about it? Jesus, is fully man whilst also being God. But what a time and place for a man whose God to be born. For the first century Jews, for a man to call himself God is regarded as the sin of blasphemy, which held the death penalty by stoning. So say who you are, and you will likely be stoned! It was dangerous just being Jesus.

Later his followers would also attract mobs that wanted to stone them. Paul was stoned at Lystra and left for dead, but survived and carried out to the next town preaching. Sometimes the mobs were successful and one of Jesus' earliest followers, Stephen, became the first recorded Christian martyr when he was stoned to death (Acts 7).

CONTEXT: Jesus & the Feast

The incident of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery takes place in the Jerusalem temple at the end of the weeklong festival of Shelters or Booths (Succoth), which celebrates the 40 years of Moses and the Jews wandering in the wilderness, where they built temporary shelters, often with a palm roof. It was one of the three pilgrimage festivals where you travel to Jerusalem. The tradition is to build a temporary booth in which you eat a meal, and the men would often sleep for the week in the shelter, unless it rained.

Jesus has been keeping out of Judea and Jerusalem because he knows that the authorities there want to kill him. He sends his disciples to the capital with the impression he might or he might not join them. The authorities would see his disciples without him and assume he was staying away. Then he secretly goes on his own later and we find him on the last day teaching openly in the temple and making the claim he was God. The temple guards amazed at his teaching, could not bring themselves to hand him in to the chief priests as ordered, it was too big an ask of them as he was so popular with the people. After the day of controversial teaching, he disappears to the Mount of Olives to let things cool down. He probably stayed up late praying in the Mount of Olives, but still rose early in the morning to go back about his work of teaching the Kingdom of God. He went to the temple not so much because it was a consecrated place but there was sure to be plenty of people in the courtyards, many passing through and some hanging around.

The temple courtyards area covered 35 acres (the size of 35 football pitches, or 560 tennis courts), so a big area. To three sides was wide covered walkway (like cloisters), which led to the Roman fortress, and was used as a walkway for Roman Guards to regularly patrol especially during feast periods looking for any signs of trouble makers that would challenge the peace. So if Jesus could be made to do something or say something that would cause a disturbance they could probably get him arrested.

He *sat down* to teach as was the custom, and soon had a decent crowd around him. Listening to public speakers was a form of entertainment as much as it was of learning. Much like television is today. He was going to be there for a while, and began his days teaching to an eager audience. Jesus has already rattled the temple authorities with his claims, and now he is right back under their noses.

**Some scholars say that the passage 10v1-8 is a late addition, and not in the right context with John here, but whether it is this context or a different one, the message is the same.*

ADULTERY

He is about to have an encounter with a married woman who has been caught having sex with another man, and is about to be stoned for her sin. Our gut reaction is to immediately take sides with the young

lady, and cry out against the unjustness of such a harsh punishment. This may indeed be a valid response from us. However, we have to be careful not to trivialise adultery when we look at this account.

First think of a situation in which you have a married family member whose partner is caught having extra-marital affairs. Let's say you have a daughter who has been married 5 years with two small children. A young female neighbour is attracted towards your son-in-law and finds a way into his confidence, then seduces him, and your daughter finds out that he had not been working late when he had said so, but had been with his attractive neighbour. How do you feel about this. The likelihood is that this young lady will have caused the break-up of your daughter's marriage. Your son-in-law on being discovered is scared he will lose his family, it only happened twice, he is remorseful but can he rebuild trust. What will the impact be on your grandchildren. If you add up all the pain caused to all those affected, it is quite significant. Today there is no law against adultery and no punishment for causing that pain, but the pain and distress is as real as it was 2000 years ago.

Take the same scenario and put it into culture where family and the family name is everything to them, then you can see why it has no less punishment than that for worshipping an idol. Adultery was an offence to their culture which was taken very seriously. For many centuries in the middle East traditional culture understood the *honour of a family* to be attached to the *sexual behaviour of the women* in that family. So where ladies brought disrepute in this area, and violated this sexual code it was not uncommon for them to be killed by their own families.

What of the woman. We know next to nothing, what made her do something so despised by her culture, and as such great risk. Perhaps after much eating and drinking, and mixing of family groups, the young woman is enticed into a shelter by a younger man. She would go just for a few minutes that's all, but whether it was the drink or the need for intimacy, or both, one thing led to another. That's often the way. For a fleeting moment it felt so right. It was done in secret, it was done under darkness, where much wrongdoing happens. She was totally unaware that cousins of her husband had seen her go, and had followed out of view. Stood outside the thin divide they could clearly hear them in the act of passion. She looks up in horror as she hears a deep voice from inside the booth now, shout adultery. She looks at the young man wrapped around her for immediate help, and he throws up his hands as says to the two men that he had no idea she was married. He lied, and she was covered up and dragged away, where she was arrested and taken to the next session of the temple court authorities called the Sanhedrin.

THE PLAN & THE TRAP:

It was a difficult session, they did not like making an official ruling for stoning, and in the temple they could only issue capital punishment themselves for temple violations i.e. Gentiles being where they shouldn't be.. Yet here were two witnesses that had caught her in the very act, wanting her to be stoned to preserve family honour. Then one of the Pharisees came up with a brainwave. The Pharisees believed that Jesus was in league with Satan, and had the common people fooled and misled by his clever words and tricks, but they now had a cunning plan to discredit Jesus, so cunning you could tie a tail to it and call it 'Foxy'. Today they would not send out their temple guards, but would go themselves to Jesus. They would act out their plan right under the military observance of the Roman soldiers.

It is a *highly charged* situation as the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law from the Sanhedrin, and their own supporters, drag a young woman before Jesus, with the Romans watching on. The crowd not phased yesterday by the odd temple guard sniffing around, now sense big trouble when the Sanhedrin appear and many of them no doubt quickly dispersed. They didn't want trouble themselves. Jesus is now surrounded by his opponents, and they are carrying stones. Not a good place for a man who knows that he is God but where blasphemers are stoned. With them is a woman accused of adultery. Both Jesus and the woman are in real danger. *Death is close.*

There was never any thought for the Pharisees that Jesus could be considered the Messiah, but they were greatly concerned that he could be considered a genuine prophet of God, especially as he so often spoke out against them and their religiosity, their own detailed interpretations of the law that they wanted imposed on others. Having disrupted his teaching, they now flatter him with the title Master or Teacher hoping it would help ensnare him, but false compliments are no disguise to some-one who can see the nature of your heart.

"Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. In our Law Moses commanded that such a woman must be stoned to death. Now, what do you say?"

They had previously accused Jesus of not knowing the law, but here where the law requires both guilty parties to be held to account, they only bring the lady to Jesus, proving that this is not about the law, it is about getting Jesus into trouble. They make the woman stand before him, as if setting him up as the judge – condemn her to death or let her go – you say. He has no desire to act as judge and jury against this woman. Yet, he is the only person truly qualified to do so, as he is the one person who is without any Sin, and he has the authority given him by God. He understands that the Pharisees do not have the spiritual insight to know that He is the one truly qualified to be judge, instead they are blind and ignorant to such things.

Decision 1: If he **says yes** ‘stone her’ then they will be able to point to his inconsistency, This man claims to be a friend of sinners, prostitute and tax-collectors, and now he condemns one of them to death – what sort of prophet changes his mind every 5 seconds. Go on then Jesus throw the first stone. By starting a stoning in the temple courtyard this would have quickly brought the Romans down on him and arrest him. Though a possible answer, this is not the one they expected from him, he is more likely to come down on her side, but that would be even better for his accusers.

Decision 2: If he **says – no** don’t stone her., then they can discredit him on two accounts:-

a) He is going against the law of Moses – so confirms their prejudice that he has come to destroy the law and the prophets not uphold their the teachings.

b) As a friend of sinners, he favours sin and supports wickedness, he trivialises Sin. – not the strict discipline, purity and business of a true prophet.

Get-out route: If he instead claims she deserved stoning but the political climate prevents it, and points to the Romans, then they can call him a coward, and one who is afraid to uphold the laws of Moses, very unlike a prophet. True prophets would not think of themselves first.

Credit to the Pharisees for ingenuity, it is a very clever trap. Can he find a narrow path which does not condone or trivialise her sin, and does not condemn her as a person.?

SILENCE: Writing & New Justice:

But he bent over and wrote on the ground with his finger. ⁷ As they stood there asking him questions

One of my favourite images of Jesus, is him sat quietly on the ground writing in the sand. It is actually the **only** mention in the bible of Jesus writing. Wow! But what is frustrating is that we are not told what he wrote! Of course, speculation is rife, and one nice suggestion is that he was writing the names of the accusers in the sand, as if he was considering them and their faults. We just don’t know. He could have just been doodling. Why when Jesus is actually finally writing something down do the Gospel tellers decide they will not let us know what it is! I think if he had written something important then they would have told us. If this were so, then he is buying time, allowing for some of the heat of the situation to evaporate. Yet the interrupting Pharisees are not happy with the non-response and keep plying him for questions.

This final day of the festival was to be treated as a Sabbath. Writing, if it makes a permanent record, was forbidden on the Sabbath as work, but writing in the sand was allowed as this does not make a permanent account, with the wind soon blowing it away. Jesus is making the point that he is very familiar with Moses and the law, and does not need to be told of what is and what is not permitted. One opinion, which I like, is that he writes the law on the sand i.e. This is what the law says. ‘stone her with many stones’. This would make it clear that he understands the seriousness of what the lady has done, and what the Jewish law says the consequence should be. He lets them read it, and still in his silence they test him with questions. They want him to make a verbal judgement, one that all who can not read, can hear, one that will without doubt be taken as his proclamation, and then can be used to trap him once and for all.

A new justice. Jesus though despising sin, does not despise the sinner and he has come to bring justice in a new way, as foretold about him. Isaiah had given a prophecy about one who was to come, a suffering servant, a prophecy of Jesus:- A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice. (Is 42v3). In front of Jesus was a broken reed that he would not order to be broken, Here was a wick burning so dimly it was about to go out. He would not quench it.

At this point the woman seems lost and dead. She is lost to her family, and her death warrant is all but signed. No doubt the listeners of Jesus have been pushed back by the accusers. She is bound and made to stand surrounded by young and old men all holding stones ready to throw at her. The Rabbi who is asked to make judgement over her, is unknown to her, and she expects nothing from him.

Death is close. It is very close. But Jesus is closer. For her, there seems no hope. Then Jesus speaks...

When there is no hope, when death is close, when all is lost, we need to hear the voice of Jesus, for he changes everything.

JESUS SPEAKS: Trap is turned

Let the one among you who is without sin, cast the first stone.

Quite brilliantly he turns the trap back onto the accusers. He acknowledges the sin, and the punishment, but he brings each individual out of the cover of a mob into the spotlight of scrutiny.

In effect he is saying anyone of you can start the stoning, if you can stand before God and say that you have not sinned. You clearly want me to go to prison in order to uphold the law of Moses over and above the Roman Law. I am willing to do that for you. The Romans are watching, you throw the first stone under my approval, and for the sake of Moses, both you and I will uphold the law of Moses and go together to prison for starting the disturbance.

However theirs is a culture of reputation and shame. You don't do things that are right or wrong full-stop, you do things that will either bring honour or shame to your family. Would you be the one who steps out in a crowd and says 'I am without sin', in other words I have never done wrong. Isaiah wrote 'All we like sheep have gone astray (Is 53v6), and from Ecclesiastes 7v20 'Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins'. To make such a claim in front of others, against the weight of scripture would surely bring dishonour and shame to your house.

By his simple word, he deflects the ensnaring net back onto his accusers, and they are tangled in it.

Jesus having delivered the challenge, went back to writing in the sand. Doodling, or writing out more of the law? Who knows. He had said all he was going to say to the accusers. This was their moment of decision now.

They were the ones now in the dock, having to think about their own sins. Some had done many, perhaps even committed adultery. He might even know the individual sins, and expose their shame. But if any had wanted to repent here was the time to do it. None did.

The oldest and the wisest, quickly realised the futility of the situation and walked away first. The young men were left holding firm to their stones. We see in our trouble zones that whilst it may be the old men that stir their hearts with fighting words, terrorism and acts of atrocity are often carried out by the young men, pumping with testosterone and the need to prove themselves as a man, to leave their mark, to show their bravado. As the mob dissipates, those left become more sub-conscious of their actions. Where are their elders that hatched this plan?. Showing disgust they spit on their ground, tilt back their heads raising their noses in the traditional sneer, drop their stones and slowly leave.

Set Free: Jesus stops writing in the sand, and straightens himself up. He looks at the woman, standing there with her head bowed still trembling with fear and shock. The judge and the accused now face to face. She is still a sinner, she has still let down her husband, and brought disgrace to her family name. In front of her stands the young rabbi, with a radiant but powerful presence. He has still has the power to snuff out the candle. Then Jesus speaks again. This time, for the first time to the Woman.
"Where are they? Is there no-one left to condemn you?"

She gingerly looks up, to now see she is alone with Jesus. There is no mob, there is no crowd. There are no angry voices. There are no fists clenching stones.

She whispers 'No-one Sir', showing Jesus the respect he deserves.

With compassion in his eyes, and love in his heart, he delivers the words of Hope that sets her free from the spectre of death.

“Then neither do I condemn you. Go and don’t do it again’.

Jesus accepts the sexual code of the Old Testament ethic. What she did in the sight of God was indeed wrong. However he goes onto remove her from any punishment.

Death was close, but Jesus was closer, and **He has set her free** from death. The candle flickers back into life.

What he does for the woman caught in adultery, he is about to do for us, when he shortly comes to be nailed onto the cross. His own death, as a substitute for ours.

What have you done wrong. You may not have be unfaithful to a partner, but what have you done that displeases God. What have you done? What have you said? What have you thought, that has caused this great chasm between you and God. He is all good, he is all powerful, he has every right to be our judge. Whether you sins are small or great, he does not trivialise any of them, they are all unacceptable to him. Whilst we baulk at the thought of a lady facing the death penalty for adultery now in Syria, or back then in Palestine, we have to face up to the fact that the Bible clearly teaches that our sins, what we have done wrong, is also deserving of the death penalty, if not now then eternal separation from God when we do die. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6 v23). We have indeed like lost sheep all gone astray. Without a Saviour then we are lost. Death is close... but we need to know that Jesus is closer.

POWER & LOVE:

He has the Power over all things including death. There is no situation that God can not change if that is in his plan for your life. But whilst he has incredible Power, he also has incredible love for me and you

But how can a God who is all knowing and all powerful, be one that wants to draw close personally and intimately with us. Surely the two are not really compatible.

The Love/Fear Pendulum

Imagine a pendulum which reflects our image of, and attitude to, God. To the right is an image of an awesome and magnificent God above and beyond all things, who has an incredible power and who hates the wrong things we do, our Sin. This is a God to be greatly feared. To the left is an image of a God who is our Abba, our Father, full of love and forgiveness for anything that we do wrong, embracing us with a big hug. This is a God to be intimate with. In Britain’s medieval Christian world where was the pendulum of belief and teaching from the pulpits. It was a long way to the right. Here was a gospel message of fire and brimstone, do as we say or go to Hell. But what about today, where is the pendulum. Perhaps for many it is now a long way to the left. God is love, and don’t worry what you do wrong, because you can just say sorry and he will forgive you, and all is good. But if we allow our pendulum to swing too far that way, then we trivialise the wrong we do. Christ has to pay the price for all we’ve done wrong, if we trivialise what we have done, then we also trivialise the suffering and pain that we went through for our sakes.

As a young engineer, an older Catholic man Bernard, referred to me as a God-fearing man like himself. I was happy to hold that label, and as much as I love God, I remind myself to fear him also. He is an awesome God and not to be taken lightly. So how we can stop the pendulum swinging too far in either direction. What does a centre pendulum look like?

Imagine yourself coming and kneeling at the throne of God, with your head bowed in reverent fear realising he is all knowing, all seeing, all powerful. Then that awesome God, in the person of Jesus steps down the steps from the throne and as you kneel, not daring to look up, you feel his presence knelt beside you, then his arms wrap around you and he whispers ‘I love you’. You are enveloped in a duality of fear and love fitting for the Kings of Kings and Lord of Lords, but also for the friend of sinners.

Jesus is close

Jesus is close, but he wants to get closer still. Proverbs 18v24 says that there is a friend, closer than a brother. We all need friends like that. We need Jesus to be a friend like that. Can our God be also our friend. In the first century there had never been a God, any God, that could also be considered a personal friend, such a concept had never been imagined. This was new.

Just before Jesus was arrested, he said to his disciples, I do not call you servants, I call you friends. We have a God who we want to serve, because we love him, but at the same time, he says to us that we have to prove nothing to him, that we are loved by Him just as we are. He is close to you today, and whether you know him personally or not, he wants to get closer. He wants to inhabit our lives, and be at the centre of all we do, which is actually can be quite a painful transition for us, and we gradually throw out the stuff that hinders our relationship with Jesus.

Confess, ignite the flame, and be coloured in

You have done wrong. I have done wrong. It's no good pretending otherwise, because God is all knowing and all seeing. We must not run away from the accusations like the Pharisees did, but stand firm in front of our perfect judge, and confess to him, ask him for forgiveness, accept that forgiveness, try not to do it again, and move on. That is what he expected from the woman caught in adultery and it's what he expects me and you today. We must not trivialise the things we do wrong, or keep doing them wittingly, just because we know we are loved and forgiven. Why, because they are not without cost, cost to Jesus. He pays that price for what we have done wrong in the past and what we do in the future. Fear him, not in a negative way, but in a way that is in awe of his majesty and power.

But when we come to him and confess our wrongdoings, and give our life over to Jesus and his direction. We put ourselves in touch with his Love and his Power.

Just like the woman we can be like a flickering candle, struggling to stay alight. No matter what we have done wrong, whoever we are, whatever our past is. He loves us - He will not snub our candle out. He is our booth, our shelter, our refuge in any storm, but there's more... much more. We can be ablaze for Him. The famous British preacher John Wesley said: "Light yourself on fire with passion and people will come from miles to watch you burn."

Last week our bible teacher recalled a dinner with her small daughter, and they were deep into vegetable negotiations, when the little girl - asks how does God make people alive, and then answered her own question. Does he draw their outline first then colour them in. It's a great image.

As we come on confess to Jesus, lay all we've done wrong at his feet to bury on the Cross, it is as if he is drawing in the sand again, but this time it's an outline of you. He's then ready to colour you in with his love, his gifts, his fruit, and his power. He will paint us with all the creativity that you would expect from the maker of the universe

We need to face up to what we do wrong, not trivialising it, and ask for forgiveness. But we also need to get his help in handing over those parts of our lives that we have wanted to keep for ourselves, those areas we have kept Jesus out of us. Because as we clean up our act, and consecrate more of our lives his love and his power can flow more easily through us to others. We can then start living life more to the full. We are no longer a flickering flame, fearing death, in danger of being snubbed out, but we become a light on a hill, or a raging fire ablaze for Jesus.

As he paints into our outline His Love and His Power we become more alive. We feel him closer and closer and can see him working in the World through us, with the love to reach a generation and the Power to overcome all things.

Death is close - perhaps, but Jesus is closer. May his Power and Love flow through you. Amen