

## **Christ and His Cross: A Case for the Ages, 4/17/22**

Two weeks ago I was an attorney, a defense attorney for my client, Judas Iscariot. Today I stand before you in a different role. I am a detective, the best around—or at least, the best available. They call me Spade.

Sam Spade.

Now to tell you the truth, friend, business hasn't been as good as it used to be. Granted, the city remains the same: never an easy place to live; always an easy place to die. Fortunately, the *living* often found their way to my office, which made investigating their counterparts a steady and reliable source of income.

But times have changed. Nowadays people go straight to the fuzz. They prefer law enforcement to the work of a private detective. So when it comes to cases, I can't be selective. I take what I can get.

The case I want to share with you this morning is one such case. It occurred last March when a young man, somewhere in his early twenties, came

to my office and plopped himself onto one of the chairs in the lobby.

“Mr. Spade,” my secretary said through the intercom on my desk next to a computer I never used, “you have someone here to see you.”

“Send him in,” I said, eager for the work. I was sitting in my swivel chair facing the office window when the door opened. It was a cloudy, late afternoon, which meant that the lights of the city were already beginning to appear. I turned to greet my prospective client, expecting someone my age or older. Instead, it was a kid, probably somewhere in his early twenties.

“What can I do for you, son?” I asked. He said nothing in response.

“Well, what’s your name?” I demanded.

“John,” he replied quietly. “John Kwester.”

Now this Kwester, he was a peculiar type. He had long, shaggy blond hair, was easily over six feet tall, and probably weighed about 150 pounds—skinny as a rail. He slouched, his head facing downward.

“All right, Kwester,” I said, motioning to the chair in front of my desk. “What brings you in?”

“I’m trying to solve a murder,” he said soft-spokenly, still looking at the ground.

“A murder?” I asked. “Have you gone to the police? That’s where everyone goes these days.”

“No,” he answered, “but I’ve been to see just about everyone else, and nobody can help me. I was hoping you could.”

“Well,” I said, curious but skeptical, “tell me what happened. Who died and when did it occur?”

“About two thousand years ago,” he replied. “I want to know why Jesus died.”

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“Now, wait a minute, kid,” I said. “Is this some kind of joke? I can’t solve the murder of a man who’s been dead for two thousand years! Why don’t you talk to a priest or a pastor?”

“I’ve tried,” Kwester replied, “but I can’t get a straight answer from anyone. I figured a detective like you

could make some headway, and I can pay you from a trust that I have.”

Suddenly my eyes widened. Now he had my attention. This kid might be crazy, I thought, but he has a bank account, and I have to keep the lights on. Besides, the case was certainly more intriguing than the others I had been getting, even if I had no idea where even to start.

“Ok, kid,” I said, “you got yourself a deal. I’ll do some digging. See what I can find. Who knows? Maybe in a couple of days I’ll have an answer for you.”

Kwester had been looking down the whole time. Finally, he raised his head and looked at me. “Thank you,” he said, sounding relieved. “You have to find out the truth. I must know who did it...and why.”

I looked down to find a pen and a writing pad amidst all the papers scattered across my desk. I had a few questions for the kid. Just then, I heard the door open and closed. I looked up. He was gone.

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“That’s great,” I said to myself. “Now where on earth (or in heaven) do I begin?” I mean, anyone could start with a Google search, but imagine all the hits I’d get simply by typing in the question, “Why did Jesus die?” How would I know what information was trustworthy?

Perhaps it would be better, I mused, to follow my own advice, the advice I gave to the kid: interview a few experts, the clergy, people who had presumably been *trained* for ministry, people who had reliable information about Jesus and why he died. Maybe they might know something, and I could certainly read them better than a website.

Then it hit me. I knew exactly the place to start: I needed a rabbi.

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The next morning I found myself at Temple Beth Jor-El, a synagogue down the street from my office. I could still smell the rain from the night before as I entered the building. “Good morning,” I heard almost immediately. “I’m Sam Stein, the rabbi here at Temple Beth Jor-El. What can I do you?”

“I’m Detective Sam Spade,” I replied. “I’m trying to solve a murder case.”

“Oh my,” he gasped. “Forgive me, but I’m not used to speaking with detectives about such matters. We should probably sit down.”

Rabbi Stein then motioned me into his office and pointed to a chair directly opposite of his. A large, mahogany desk separated us.

“Now tell me, please,” he said anxiously. “Who died? When did it happen? Is it someone connected with the synagogue?”

“Well, yes, the person in question is connected with the synagogue,” I replied, “at least in a manner of speaking.”

I paused, knowing how what I was about to say would sound. “I want to know who killed Jesus of Nazareth and why,” I said without the slightest hint of expression.

“Mr. Spade, are you aware that this is a twenty-first century *Jewish* house of worship? How in the world would I know the answer to your question, apart

from the fact that even today some of his “followers” still blame us for his death?”

“Well,” I said, “Thanks to a few years of Catholic school, I know Jesus was Jewish. His earliest followers were Jewish. The first people they converted were Jewish, and so I figured you might know something because you...are Jewish.”

Rabbi Stein was silent. He probably thought I was as out of my mind as the kid who hired me. “I can certainly tell you this,” he finally said. “We, ‘the Jews,’ did not kill Jesus. I took a course in the New Testament when I was in rabbinical school, and the truth seems obvious: certain religious leaders of his day drew up phony charges against him. Then they handed him over for sentencing by the Roman government. The Roman government saw him as a threat to civil order, and so they crucified him.”

“Why were the Romans so quick to judge him?” I asked. “Maybe there was some truth to the charges he faced.”

“Honestly,” the rabbi replied, “I see Jesus as an innocent man, a good rabbi in the wrong place and at the wrong time—a man who drew crowds and thus became the target of state-sanctioned

terrorism. Like many of our people, he died unjustly.”

“This is definitely not the account I know,” I said. “But it makes sense. The Romans did it and for one reason: even the hint of sedition, in this case simply attracting followers, must be met with swift and decisive force. Otherwise, it would jeopardize the *Pax Romana*, the peace that existed between nationalities within the Roman Empire.”

“I’d say you know your history,” Rabbi Stein remarked, mildly impressed. “Maybe you learned more in Catholic school than you think.”

I smiled, more amused than anything. “But what about people who say Jesus died for our sins?” I asked.

“Long before Jesus, our people viewed blood as a cleansing agent, kind of like Ajax or Mr. Clean, only it purifies what people today might call the soul. We see this teaching especially in the Book of Leviticus. Since the earliest Christians were Jews, they used it to make sense of Jesus’ execution. “Why did he die? So that his blood could remove the stain of our sins.”



Rabbi Stein then reached for a book on the shelf behind him. "This is the Christian Bible we used in my New Testament course. He opened it and began to read: 'If we walk in the light we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.'"

"Ah," I exclaimed. "So for the early Christians, he died not simply because he was a threat to the *Pax Romana*; he died as sacrifice to make us clean."

The rabbi nodded. "That's from the First Letter of John."

"But I was taught that Jesus died *in our place* to pay a debt owe to God for our sin," I said.

"That's a different understanding of sacrifice. You won't find it in the Book of Leviticus or even the First Letter of John."

"Do Jews still believe that the blood of animals cleanses us from our sin?" I asked.

"When sacrifices were offered in ancient times, they were offered to fulfill biblical commandments," Rabbi Stein replied. "Since there is no longer a Temple in which to perform these sacrifices, modern religious

Jews pray or give to charity to make amends for their sins.”

“Must make for a lot less mess,” I said, smirking.

“I’m afraid that’s all I can offer you, Detective Spade,” the rabbi said. “Perhaps you should try a *Christian* house of worship next. New Life Neighborhood Church is right up the street. Perhaps they can help you.”

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Apparently, a lot of people attend New Life, which means the pastor might be busy, so I called ahead. Fortunately, I was told he could see me, albeit briefly.

Upon arrival, I noticed immediately huge white walls stretching upward toward the sky. Once inside, a bank of windows separated the main lobby from what looked like a small arena without any religious artwork or iconography.

To my left was a sign pointing me to the office, inside of which was a lobby. “I’m Detective Sam Spade,” I said to the receptionist. I’m here to see the pastor.”

“Have a seat,” she replied. “He’ll be with you shortly.”

I sat down, looking instinctively for something to read. On a large, square, glass table I saw a few magazines as well as a book. I picked it up and read the title. It said, *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis.

Just then, I heard my name. “Detective Spade, I’m Pastor Scott. Please come in.” He motioned me through his office door.

“I’m working on a murder case,” I said before sitting down.

“I’m confused,” he replied. “Julie told me you called to talk about Jesus.”

“Yes, precisely. I want to find out who killed him and why. The rabbi at Beth Jor-El told me the local religious leaders along with the Roman government were responsible.

“That’s partially true,” Pastor Scott replied, “but there’s more to it. He died for your sins.”

“For my sins?” I asked, feeling myself become defensive. “Now wait a minute! Ask anyone in the business: ain’t nothing crooked about Sam Spade.”

“Friend,” the pastor said, “all of us sin, and because of that we have to make ourselves right with God. We have to pay for our sins to appease God and satisfy the demand he places upon us for justice.”

“Well, how do we do that? Pray? Give to charity?”

“Oh no. We cannot avoid sin, which means we cannot pay the debt we owe to God. We deserve eternal punishment, and we would get it if it weren’t for God’s Son—Jesus Christ—who pays the price for us by receiving the punishment *we deserve* on the cross.

“Is that in the Bible?” I asked.

“Of course,” Pastor Scott replied. Hebrews 10:10 says that “it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified [or made holy] through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.”

“Interesting,” I replied. “The rabbi told me, quoting 1 John, that the blood of Christ cleanses us. You’re telling me the debt he paid was to satisfy *God*, but

even the verse you cite here emphasizes that we *have been sanctified.*”

“Your rabbi has forgotten his own Scriptures,” the pastor retorted. Isaiah 53 prophesies that Jesus would bear our infirmities, and that he would be ‘struck down by God and afflicted.’ That’s the only way to make things right.”

“By God killing His own son? That sounds more like murder to me. What kind of God would do that?”

“Jesus died willingly,” Pastor Scott replied, “all for the sake of satisfying God.”

“Well, that may satisfy God, but it doesn’t satisfy me,” I blurted out, surprised by my reaction.

Moments later, I found myself back in the lobby. Now I was confused. Did Jesus die to purify us, or did he die to placate an angry God? I walked over to the table in the lobby and picked up the copy of *Mere Christianity* I looked at earlier. Perhaps hoping for some kind of divine intervention, I opened it up and read the first thing I saw.

Lewis writes: “What I came to see later on was that neither this theory nor an[y] other is Christianity.” I

looked up a few lines. He was talking about the various theories of atonement, the explanations—like the two I had now heard—for why Jesus died. He continues, “The central belief [of Christianity] is that Christ’s death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. Theories as to how it did this are another matter: A good many different theories have been held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work” (pp. 57-58).

I was stunned. Here Lewis was reminding his readers that *how we’re saved remains a mystery*, that *all* the explanations we have for it fall short.

I left New Life Neighborhood Church feeling humbled, if not helpless. Was there no alternative theory to what I had heard, one I could take back to the kid as perhaps a *relatively better* explanation? Or was this a case that not even the great Sam Spade could solve?

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I decided to take a different way back to the office. Wanting to clear my head, I meandered down different side streets and through a couple of alleys,

only to come across a church I'd never seen before. The sign read, "Victory in Christ Lutheran Church."

The title puzzled me. Pastor Scott said Christ paid for our sins, but what did he overcome?

I entered the building, not sure what to think about these Lutherans. The church was quiet. Two large, swinging doors stood before me. That must be where they worship, I thought. I was correct.

Inside the sanctuary, I immediately looked up. It looked like an upside-down boat given how the supporting beams were arranged beneath the ceiling. Ahead of me I recognized from my Catholic school days the baptismal font. I saw a service bulletin next to it which I opened, only to read these words: "By the baptism of Jesus' death and resurrection, you set us free from the power of sin and death and raise us up to live in you."

"I'll be..." I started to say out loud before I remembered where I was. "It sounds like Christ entered the world to fight some kind of battle, a cosmic battle against the forces of evil and death, one that cost him his life but which he overcame in and through his resurrection."

“That’s impressive,” a voice behind me said.

I turned around. Before me stood a woman in her forties wearing one of those collars I used to see only on priests.

“I’m Pastor Julie,” she said. “Welcome to Victory in Christ Lutheran Church.”

“Detective Sam Spade,” I replied. “Tell me, what’s in the name?”

“Well, we believe God gave up Jesus, as Paul says in Romans 8:32, to confront death itself and ultimately defeat it as evident in the resurrection. We sing about it throughout the Easter season. Here,” she added, picking up a hymnal from the nearest pew, “take a look.”

Pastor Julie opened the hymnal to a song called “The Strife is O’er, the Battle Done.” I read its first two stanzas: “The strife is o’er, the battle done; now is the victor’s triumph won! The powers of death have done their worst; Jesus their legions has dispersed.”

“So, Christ was sacrificed in battle?” I asked, looking up.



“Yes,” the pastor replied. “That’s why I mentioned that God gave him up, not because God needed to be paid a debt, but out of the ‘fierce love’ or grace God has for us! God sent Jesus into the far country of sin to break the grip of death and free us from what the Gospel of John calls the ‘ruler’ of this world, which is sin personified.”

“I see. So, there is no good news without the resurrection.”

“Precisely! You can’t have a resurrection without the death that precedes it, and certainly it is through Christ’s death that God identifies fully with our suffering, but “if Christ has not been raised”—as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:17—“your faith is useless and you are still in your sins.”

“I’ve never heard this before,” I said. “You Lutherans must really celebrate on Easter Sunday.”

“We do,” although I wish we’d raise our voices and celebrate even more. Christ has risen! Death has lost its sting! Alleluia!”

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When I got back to the office, I got the kid's number from my secretary and called him immediately.

"Kid," I said over the phone. "While nobody, not even me, can solve for good the mystery of salvation in Christ, I think I have something for you. I can tell *you provisionally* why Jesus died and whodunit!"

"That's okay," the young man replied. "My theology professor at SPU changed the assignment. We don't have to know anymore why he died."

"That explains why you were so sullen when we met," I replied. "You had an impossible assignment."

"I did, but I can still pay you, Mr. Spade."

"Nah," I replied, "I feel like I already got paid." And as I hung up the phone, I heard myself say, "He is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia."

Amen