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# THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

AN EXPLORATION OF CORRUPTION,  
BRIBERY, TRANSPARENCY & JUSTICE  
IN THE **CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES**

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# THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

## BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON CORRUPTION IN THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS

### IN BRIEF:

Spirituality and resisting corruption are closely tied together in the Bible where right behaviour is inextricably linked to the worship of God. This shapes attitudes to corruption throughout the Bible.

- The word 'corruption' in English Bibles has more to do with decay than with 'institutional corruption', but the word 'bribery' is valuable in helping us to understand the Bible position on the subject. Bribery is soundly condemned because it undermines the impartiality expected of those in power.
- Part of Adam and Eve's sin in the garden was acting with self-interest to gain the knowledge of good and evil, a self-interest which blinded them to God's command.
- Samuel's concern about the people's request for a king was that it would give the King too much power and open the door to corruption. In reality, the King was seen as ruling in God's place and was expected to live out the same principles as God. There was no room for corruption of any kind in Israel's kingship. Jesus' own kingship gave us a glimpse of what Kingship should look like.
- The reason why usury, or lending money for interest, was condemned was because it encouraged the accumulation of wealth by some and the consequent impoverishment of others.

- Jesus lived in a world marked by corruption and greed and his teaching sought to show people how to live in such a world with gentle, generous dignity.
- The response of Zacchaeus after Jesus' visit, as well as Jesus' teaching about money, illustrates that Jesus was uncompromising in his opposition to self-interest and greed.



- Three vignettes in the last week of Jesus' life show how the conflicts Jesus was involved in raise questions about corruption:

- *Jesus' cleansing of the temple critiqued Temple worship for no longer having as its major focus people's encounter with God*
- *The bribing of Judas with money meant for enhancing worshipping in the Temple reveals what can go wrong when self-interest becomes more important than justice and impartiality.*
- *The trials of Jesus also illustrate what can happen when fear and self-interest cause the principles of justice to be abandoned.*

The Bible issues a strong challenge to us all to abandon self-interest and to live according to God's principles of justice and impartiality. The last week of Jesus' life, including his death, illustrates what can go wrong when we ignore this call.





*Judas Receiving Payment for his Betrayal.*  
Giotto di Bondone. From his *Life of Christ*

## INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges of seeking to live as a Christian is the whole question of how we allow what we believe about God, and our worship of him, to affect the way in which we live out our lives. Over the years much has been written about the importance of seeking justice but much less has been said about what this means for how we respond to the very specific issue of corruption. We do not have to read far, however, before it becomes clear that just as God calls on us all to act with justice and righteousness, so also there is no room for corruption of any kind in systems of power. God expects the world to be governed as he would govern it and this expectation shapes the way in which much of the Old Testament talks about Kingship.

Alongside this, we need to acknowledge that corruption can happen for many reasons, including self-interest, greed and fear, but that, whatever the motivation, its consequences are always catastrophic and corrosive. The life of Jesus reveals this powerfully. Throughout the whole of his life and ministry Jesus revealed and challenged the realities of the corruption that existed around him. The discomfort and anger that this challenge instilled in the authorities of his day was one of the factors that lead to his death. So angry were they, in fact, that they were prepared to use any means possible to bring about his death, even the corruption which Jesus had so soundly

**At the heart of the account of the last week of Jesus' life, lies the iconic image of the thirty pieces of silver given to Judas as a bribe to betray Jesus.**

criticised. At the heart of the account of the last week of Jesus' life, lies the iconic image of the thirty pieces of silver given to Judas as a bribe to betray Jesus. This image reminds us powerfully of the consequences of corruption and what can happen when the principles of God's justice are considered of less importance than holding onto power.

## APPROACHING A STUDY OF CORRUPTION

One of the questions raised by the attempt to use the Bible to reflect on any thematic subject is the question of how you do it. For many people a default starting point is word studies, in which a word is looked up in a concordance to see how it is used throughout the Bible. This approach can often provide a helpful starting point for thematic exploration as it provides a way to explore the sweep of ways in which certain words are used throughout the Bible.

**Israelite society was founded on the expectation of 'righteousness', this concept involved not only 'acting rightly' but also being in 'right relationship' with God and with each other.**

### Word Studies and the difficulties they cause.

The problem with word studies is that words do not always mean what we think they mean. The word 'corruption' is an interesting example of this. A simple word search on the English word 'corruption' leads us to the Greek words *phthora* and *diaphthora*. The problem, caused in this instance by the nature of English language itself, is that neither *phthora* nor *diaphthora* mean the kind of corruption that is the subject of our current study. *Phthora* or *diaphthora* refers to destruction, decay or ruin and is most often used in the New Testament to refer to what happens to the flesh (as can be seen in Galatians 6.8: 'if you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh'). This does not mean that the Bible has nothing to say about institutional corruption – far from it – simply that word studies in English need to be employed with care to ensure that they provide what we want them to provide.

**Officials were expected to act impartially in coming to a judgment about who was in the right. Indeed the righteousness of the official depended on their ability to be impartial.**

### Bribery and its impact on Righteousness

While a word search on 'corruption' does not provide us with everything that we need to explore institutional corruption in the Bible, there is a word which offers a more fruitful field of enquiry to begin our search. This is the word bribery. The Hebrew word '*sehad*' often translated as gift or bribe describes an action that is regularly condemned throughout the Hebrew Bible. Bribery is described as having a two-edged effect, as Exodus 23.8 makes clear: 'for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right' (see also Deuteronomy 16.19). This reveals a fundamental principle of Israelite society which will underpin much of our subsequent explorations and reaches right to the heart of covenantal theology. Israelite society was founded on the expectation of 'righteousness', this concept involved not only 'acting rightly' but also being in 'right relationship' with God and with each other. These are intertwined – acting rightly ensures good relationship.

What counted as 'righteous behaviour' was shaped and defined by role. Those with power were expected to use that power with impartiality, so that those without power could be confident that they would always ensure justice rather than support a pre-determined position. Officials were expected to act impartially in coming to a judgment about who was in the right. Indeed the righteousness of the official depended on their ability to be impartial.

What bribes did were to make officials partial and therefore blind to righteousness. Bribery was, as a result, a complete anathema to the cause of justice. This is why God is also described in Deuteronomy 10.17 as great and mighty, 'who is not partial and takes no bribe'. God himself was deeply just, this justice depended on his impartiality and his refusal to accept bribes in any form.

This initial word study, then, points to some key issues about the nature of righteousness which will help shape an exploration of corruption in what follows. Two strands in particular stand out: the first is the recognition that 'bribery' is an 'anti-covenant' word. God's faithfulness

**It is clear that because God is impartial and takes no bribes, officials should be the same. Corruption is an anti-God word.**

to his covenant was demonstrated by his righteousness and impartiality, and almost by definition bribery undermines these principles. A second strand is the connection between the nature of God and those in power. It is clear that because God is impartial and takes no bribes, officials should be the same. Corruption is an anti-God word.

### FOR REFLECTION

- How often does your thinking about individuals or society more broadly reflect impartiality?
- Can you think of situations where justice and impartiality have been abandoned - for example globally, nationally, in your workplace, your relationships or your church?
- To what extent do you practically address abuses of power in everyday life?



## CREATION AND CORRUPTION

While, on one level, the story of the fall cannot be about corruption since it does not involve people with power and people without power, on the other hand the actions of Adam and Eve in the garden reveal something important about the nature of righteousness and our relationship with God. The primary sin of Adam and Eve was, of course, disobedience to God's command, but

**Part of Adam and Eve's sin was acting with self-interest.**

a secondary factor in their sin was acting with self-interest. The serpent's conversation with Eve persuaded her that she should know the difference between good and evil. This idea

captivated her so much that she ignored God's prohibition against eating the fruit. It was self-interest that made both Eve and Adam blind to what God had commanded.

This theme of self-interest and its damaging impact on society returns again and again throughout the Bible. It occurs, for example, in the stories of David and Bathsheba, Naboth's vineyard, the disciples who wanted to sit at the right and left of Jesus and of course in the giving of the thirty pieces of silver to Judas to betray Jesus. Self-interest always, as it did in Eden, blinds people to wider issues, to commands from God and is corrosive of community and society. Conversely caring for the interests of others as Paul advises in Philippians 2.4 ('Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others') builds up community and relationships.



## KINGSHIP, JUBILEE AND JUSTICE

Reflections on the good use of power begin in earnest in the Old Testament around the question of whether Israel should have a King or not. An iconic moment here is Samuel's tirade against kingship in 1 Samuel 8.11-18. Until this moment in Israel's history, Israel had functioned as a theocracy. This meant that they believed that God ruled the nation himself, with help from temporary leaders like judges and prophets. The request for a king undermined that principle

**The reasons Samuel gives against kingship all fall into the bracket of opening the way for potential 'corruption'.**

and required a change of perception about who ruled Israel. The reasons Samuel gives against kingship all fall into the bracket of opening the way for potential 'corruption'. He advised against a King on the grounds that the king could enforce their sons to be soldiers (8:11); he could make people work for him for his benefit not theirs (8:12-13); he could appropriate land for himself and his favourites (8:14); and he would take what belonged to them and use it himself (8.15-17). What this reveals is a suspicion of human power and the ease with which humans beings can abuse the power given to them for their own benefit.

It is widely accepted by scholars that the books of Samuel are not unequivocally anti-monarchical. They couldn't be. Their whole narrative, which stretches into 1 and 2 Kings as well, is focussed around the successes and failures of Kingship in Israel and

Judah, but what this narrative reveals is a realisation of the danger of human power and an abhorrence of that power when it is abused.

### **The Principle of Jubilee**

It is worth noting that the suspicion of the abuse of human power almost certainly account for one of the key principles upon which the settlement in the Promised Land was based. The cancel the debt/Jubilee campaign has appropriately drawn our attention to the deep principle of jubilee that stands as a pillar within Old Testament law. Just as one day a week was marked out as a Sabbath day, so also one year every seven years was

**Samuel's concern seems to be is that the King would have power over everything and the people would no longer be able to protest when that power was abused.**

marked out so that land can rest and recover (Exodus 23.10-11 and Leviticus 25.1-4). Connected to this Hebrew slaves were to be released every seven years (Exodus 21.2-6) and debts forgiven every seven years (Deuteronomy 15.1-6). The concept of Jubilee is an extension of this. Every seven times seven years the Sabbath is doubled – the 49th year is a Sabbath year and the fiftieth year proclaimed holy (Leviticus 25.8-13). If this were followed then it would ensure that no Hebrew slave remained in captivity for the whole of his life and that no one accumulated more than their fair share of land.

When the people of God settled in the land, it was shared equitably, at least in principle, between every tribe and family. The principle of Jubilee sought

to ensure a regular return to this state of affairs. The reality indicates that this rule was never fully enacted; time and time again observations are made in the Bible about the way in which this law was overlooked and ignored (see Leviticus 26.1-35; Jeremiah 34.14; Isaiah 61.1-2).

Samuel's anxiety about Kingship expressed in 1 Kings chapter 8 seems to be linked profoundly with the principles of Jubilee and justice. It is one thing to overlook the practice of Jubilee but quite another to alter the principles of the land so significantly that you give away the theory that everyone should own their own land and have it returned to them under the rules of Jubilee. Samuel's concern seems to be that the King would have power over everything and the people would no longer be able to protest when that power was abused. This tells us that right at the heart of the Old Testament narrative about who the people of God were, is the principle not only of justice but of a discomfort with the idea of one person or group having so much power that they are able to defraud others of what is rightfully theirs.

We must set this, however, against the practical day to day experience of living at the time of the Judges. While this period

apparently preserved the principle of equity, the reality was different. You do not need to read very far in the book of the Judges before discovering

**1 Samuel 8 raises the profoundly difficult choice between a theoretical equality but practical injustice or theoretical inequality with the possibility that the King could be either just or unjust.**

that this was a period of chaos and uncertainty. It is particularly interesting to observe that the end of this period (which is the time of Samuel) was a time marked by bribery and injustice. Indeed one of the many factors that caused the people to ask for a King was the fact that Eli's sons were corrupt and accepted bribes ('Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice 1 Samuel 8:3). 1 Samuel 8 raises the profoundly difficult choice between a theoretical equality but practical injustice or theoretical inequality with the possibility that the King could be either just or unjust. The reality is that neither choice was pure and as it turned out Israelite kingship was not like Kingship across the rest of the Ancient Near East. Indeed one of the principles of Israelite kingship was that theocracy continued in a modified form with the king ruling on God's behalf with the expectation that he would rule with the characteristics of God's own rule over his people.

### **FOR REFLECTION**

- *In what areas of your own life are you particularly tempted to act with self-interest?*
- *Where in our society do you perceive an imbalance between the need for stability and the abuse of power structures?*
- *What might living with a complete lack of self-interest look like for you today?*

## GOD'S JUSTICE AND THE KING'S JUSTICE

It is this ruling on God's behalf that shapes the character of Israelite Kingship. The king should not be despotic and corrupt because he ruled on God's behalf. Take for example 2 Chronicles 9.8 where this is made explicit: 'Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on his throne as king for the LORD your God. Because your God loved Israel and would establish them forever, he has made you king over them, **that you may execute justice and righteousness.**' In this address by the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, Solomon's kingship is recognised to be for God and as a result expected to reflect God's principles of justice and righteousness.

**It is ruling on God's behalf that shapes the character of Israelite Kingship.**

It is worth teasing these strands out a little to make the connection between kingship and anti-corruption explicit. If corruption is the dishonest conduct of those in power, then, even when they have a king, the principles undergirding the way in which Israel was set up dictated against corruption. The whole nation was expected to run on the principles of justice and righteousness but the king, and those in power who served him, had an even greater expectation of acting with justice and righteousness. God's throne in heaven was founded on justice and righteousness (see for example Psalm 89:14 'Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you') and the one sitting as his representative on the throne on earth – the King – was expected to instil justice and righteousness on his behalf. Indeed he was expected to do this not just in Israel but among the surrounding nations. Psalm 2 is uncompromising about the way in which the King, called God's son

in 2.7, was to act on God's behalf to break the nations' conspiracies.

This tells us then that where there was an expectation of justice for all Israelites, that expectation was magnified in the case of the King meaning that there was no room for corruption of any kind in Israel's kingship. This is why the Kings were condemned by the prophets even more forcefully than the rest of Israel. David's adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11) and Ahab's illegal appropriation of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) both undermined the principle of executing justice and righteousness in the land and were roundly condemned by God because of that. In both cases David and Ahab abused their power as King to get what they wanted, rather than what was good for the nation as a whole. They were roundly condemned for this as both acts entirely undermined the principles of good Kingship.

### Amos' condemnation of the King

It is worth remembering that Amos' robust condemnation of Israel for trampling the poor, taking bribes and pushing the needy aside (Amos 5.11) is interpreted by King Jeroboam in Amos 7 as a direct criticism of him. He was, in fact, right. His duty as king was not just to avoid corruption himself but to ensure that it did not happen in the land. The weight of the book of Amos suggests that Jeroboam not only acted corruptly himself but encouraged it in others and as a result was condemned by God. Indeed it is the widespread corruption in Israel that brought such condemnation from God that it sealed their fate and brought punishment upon them as a nation.

It is well known that Amos links worship of God directly with justice in 5.21-24. What this provocative passage declares is that there is no point at all in worshipping God if it is not coupled with a thorough going practice of justice. Justice is no additional extra but a fundamental expression of relationship with God. This expectation of justice does not just affect what we do but how we

**There was no room for corruption of any kind in Israel's kingship.**

engage with others; in other words as Isaiah 1.17 says 'learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow'. Those in right relationship with God should not just act justly themselves they should actively seek justice for and from others too.

### Jesus' Kingship and God's Justice

In the light of all this, the nature and importance of Jesus' kingship becomes clearer. Jesus' kingship was marked from beginning to end by a determined lack of self-interest, with a search for justice and with an impartial resistance to the abuses of power he saw around him. His was the perfect example of what kingship should look like and his 'enthronement' on the cross revealed this. Jesus, the King

**Jesus, the King acted purely out of love and care for the world and not to accumulate power or status for himself.**

acted purely out of love and care for the world and not to accumulate power or status for himself. In fact in his death Jesus revealed that true power was not to be found in the accumulation of wealth and status but in sacrificial, self-giving and love.

## USURY AND ITS CONNECTION WITH CORRUPTION

Before we leave the question of corruption in the Old Testament, it is important to pause and reflect for a while on the question of usury – or lending money for interest. This practice is now so common that it no longer appears to fit into the category we are exploring today but the discouragement of usury while not absolute in the Old Testament certainly appears on a number of occasions. Where it does appear,





the lending of money for interest is prohibited in order to protect the needs of the poor. See for example Exodus 22.25-27 where the lending of money for interest is connected to the taking of someone's cloak 'in pawn'. The point of these passages is that charging excessive interest and keeping people's belonging as guarantees leads to greater and greater poverty and should be avoided at all costs.

Indeed it was Nehemiah's greatest complaint after the exile that the people were experiencing extortion from their neighbours to such an extent that they were unable to live day to day and were suffering dire consequences as a result. When Nehemiah heard of the level of abuse that the people were suffering he laid down strictures against lending for interest and keeping the property of those who were unable to pay (see Nehemiah 5.1-12). Again this follows the theme that runs throughout the Old Testament about the need for justice and right relationship.



#### FOR REFLECTION

- What opportunities do you have to be able to support those with power to act with justice?
- Are there situations in which you have power? How might your actions and character compare with Jesus in the way you respond to these situations?
- What can you practically do to challenge extortion and structural indebtedness?





*John the Baptist*  
Detail from Mosaic at Hagia Sophia, Istanbul

### CORRUPTION, ABSENTEE LANDLORD AND THE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

One of the great challenges of taking the theme of corruption onwards into the New Testament is that, for the most part, the New Testament writers were not speaking to people with power and hence had less to say about the abuse of power than we might otherwise expect. But there is no reason at all to expect that Jesus' view on bribery was any different to that of the Old Testament. Indeed, his general attitude to the correct use of, for example Corban (Mark 7.11) or the way in which the Pharisees tithe mint but ignore justice (Matthew 23.23), would lead us to expect an even more stringent opposition to anything that undermined justice and right relationship.

**Certain aspects of Jesus' teaching seem to be focussed particularly on how to live with gentle, generous dignity in a corrupt context.**

Probably the first place where we encounter the whole question of the condemnation of power in the New Testament is in the person of John the Baptist. John's criticism of Herod Antipas and his wife, Herodias, was, as the gospel accounts make clear, what led directly to his death (Matthew 14.3-4; Mark 6.17-18; Luke 3.19-20). While Antipas and Herodias' actions were not, in this instance, connected with financial corruption they do represent a corruption of power. John's criticism is said to be of



the fact that Antipas had married his brother's wife. This is true but their situation was much worse than that. Herod the Great had many children by a number of different wives. Antipas and Philip (otherwise known as Herod II, and not to be confused with Philip the Tetrarch) were two of those sons. Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus IV and another of Herod the Great's sons. So not only was she the wife of one of Antipas' half-brothers, she was the daughter of another of those brothers. The power of the Herod family had undoubtedly corrupted them and their lifestyle revealed a deep toxicity which John the Baptist was not alone in criticising.

This, frankly shocking, reality reveals something of the world of Jesus. Constant jockeying for power between the former Hasmonean dynasty (descendants of Judas Maccabaeus), the descendants of Herod the Great, other members of the Jewish aristocracy and the Roman empire had led to widespread corruption in the first century. One of the more difficult aspects of this was a system of absentee landlords. This was a particular problem in Galilee where rich Jewish landowners accumulated a lot of land which they then left in the care of servants while they lived in Jerusalem. It is easy to see that many of Jesus' parables are set in the context of such a system and would have resonated strongly with his Galilean audience.

Indeed certain aspects of Jesus' teaching seem to be focussed particularly on how to live with gentle, generous dignity in such a context. Going an extra mile and turning the other cheek (Matthew 5) are both examples of ways to live subversively in such a context. A number of scholars

have observed that the only way to hit someone on their right cheek is either with the back of your hand or with your left hand. Doing either of these was a symbol of profound disrespect. Jesus calls his followers not simply to submit to injustice, but to stand up for their own dignity with gentle perseverance. Turning the other cheek required demanding that you be struck as an equal and not as a subordinate.

### ZACCHAEUS AND THE LOVE OF MONEY

An interesting occasion where we find no record of teaching from Jesus but a response to what he must have said is the story of Zacchaeus, a tax collector. It is widely, though probably incorrectly, assumed that the taxation system in Galilee and Judea during the time of Jesus was corrupt. In reality it was probably less corrupt than it had been for a very long time. The Persians introduced a system known as 'tax farming' which was effectively a tax franchise system, in which people bought the right to tax an area and then were allowed to extort from those in that area as much money as they wanted. However, following complaints the Emperor Augustus outlawed tax farming in the Roman Empire and so the practice was no longer allowed at the time of Jesus. Hatred of the tax collectors was probably due to their collaboration with the Romans more than their corruption.

Indeed the response of Zacchaeus to Jesus suggests that he hadn't been all that corrupt. He intended to give away

**Zaccheus' response suggests that what Jesus had said to him included scrupulous generosity and a refusal to gain from others misery.**

half of what he owned to the poor and from what was left to recompense anyone whom he had treated unjustly with four times the amount he had extorted from them. This would only be possible if there were not very many people he had treated in this way. Nevertheless, his response suggests that what Jesus had said to him included scrupulous generosity and a refusal to gain from others misery.

This would certainly fit with what we know from elsewhere about Jesus' teaching about money. Take for example Jesus' saying in Matthew 6.24 'No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth'. Here Jesus makes very clear that wealth and the accumulation of wealth can have a corrosive effect on the soul. Zacchaeus learnt that an encounter with Jesus was worth far more than the money he had accumulated. This is why Jesus advised the rich young ruler to sell all he had and give the proceeds to the poor (Luke 18.22). In other words having money does not make you corrupt, but loving it can so easily corrupt the soul.

### FOR REFLECTION

- *What are your own experiences of speaking or acting against systemic corruption?*
- *How do you support politicians, friends, family, co-workers and other members of your church to stand up for human dignity with gentle perseverance?*
- *What is your own relationship with money?*



## THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE AND THE BETRAYAL AND THE TRIAL OF JESUS

This brings us, at last, to the last week of Jesus' life. Here three vignette's stand out: the cleansing of the Temple; Judas' Betrayal and the Trial of Jesus.

The question of what Jesus' cleansing of the temple symbolised has exercised scholars for years. The problem is that the Temple system relied on money changing and the selling of animals for its survival. The Temple Tax could not be paid in Roman Denarii but only in Tyrian Silver, minted especially for the purpose. In order to pay the half shekel tax per male adult a year Roman coinage needed to be changed into Tyrian silver. Likewise with the animal sellers, although there are varying estimations of how many people were in Jerusalem for the Passover (from around 180,000 to 7 million), the number of animals required was so great that the only feasible way to run the system was for pure animals (according to the purity rules found in Leviticus) to be bought direct from the temple so that worshippers knew that their sacrifice would be accepted.

The key question is what Jesus meant by calling the Temple a den of 'robbers'. It may refer to the fact that the money changers and animal sellers

'robbers' is the word '*lestes*' which means more than just 'robber'. A *lestes* was a politically motivated bandit who sought to overthrow the Romans. As a result their crime was not just financial but political. Jesus' anger then appears to be focussed on those who were using their position to hold on to power rather than using it to ensure that all who worshipped at the Temple could encounter God. By his actions, Jesus seems to have been symbolising that the Temple – and with it the leaders of the people – was no longer living out its vocation as the place where God could be encountered. Love of power and fear of losing that power had diverted attention away from God and onto their own status and significance.

Probably the most iconic moment that might be deemed corruption in the New Testament is that of the bribery of Judas with thirty pieces of silver. As is well known, Judas received thirty pieces of silver in exchange for his agreement to betray Jesus. His action was doubly problematic not only because it led to Jesus' death but because of the inappropriate use of the silver coins by the Priests. The reference to the coins being silver strongly suggests that they were 'Tyrian Silver', in other words the specially minted silver coins used to

pay the Temple tax for the upkeep and maintenance of the Temple. Judas' money, therefore, was meant to enhance the worship of God – and was instead used to bring about Jesus' death. The Chief Priests were clearly far from ruling as God would, showing wise judgement and impartiality about what was

right. The giving of thirty pieces of silver to Judas illustrates what goes wrong when the biblical principles of adhering to justice and impartiality is

abandoned in favour of self-serving.

The third vignette from this last week of Jesus' life is his trial. There is a vast amount of discussion, and disagreement, between scholars on Jesus' trial and what took place there. The trial is in two parts (three in Luke's gospel). In the first part of the trial Jesus stood before the Sanhedrin, or council of Jewish leaders; in the

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second he was tried by Pilate (Luke also includes a trial before Herod Antipas). What is unclear is whether Jesus' trial by the Sanhedrin is a formal trial or not. If it was it broke all the rules set out in the Talmuds which stipulated that trials should not take place during a major festival, should take place in one of three designated areas (which did not include the High priest's house) and should not decree their judgement on the same day as the trial. All of this suggests that this was not a 'trial' per se, but a meeting to decide whether the Sanhedrin were happy to hand Jesus over to the Romans for a trial.

Whatever it was and whatever the intentions, the trials of Jesus reveal something powerful about the relationship between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. Driven as they were by fear of the Romans and by the desire to hold onto as much power as was possible in the circumstances, the Sanhedrin lost sight of the principles of justice and impartiality. They were clearly not ruling as God would have done – something that is particularly revealed in their willingness to bribe someone to achieve the outcome they had decided they wanted.

**Jesus' anger then appears to be focussed on those who were using their position to hold on to power rather than using it to ensure that all who worshipped at the Temple could encounter God.**

were corrupt but the anger of the Chief Priests against Jesus suggests that his critique was more wide ranging than that. The Greek word translated

**The events leading up to Jesus' death are events that illuminate quite what can go wrong when the principles of justice, righteousness and impartiality are not adhered to.**

The events leading up to Jesus' death are events that illuminate quite what can go wrong when the principles of justice, righteousness and impartiality are not adhered to. On one level it is possible to feel a great deal of sympathy for the Jewish leaders of Jesus' time. They had an impossible task before them – that of keeping the peace over an angry crowd so that the Roman authorities might not punish them all. The impossibility of their task, the fear that this engendered, the power that they wanted to hold on to, as well as a number of other factors, so blinkered the leaders that they did not provide Jesus with the justice that anyone might have expected, let alone the justice the Son of God deserved to receive from those who ruled in God's stead. This was not the only factor that caused Jesus' death, but it was certainly one of them.

#### **FOR REFLECTION**

- *Do you ever hold on to power in a way that highlights your own status above others'?*
- *Can you think of occasions when something that was meant to enhance the worship of God was used to perpetrate wrong doing instead?*
- *Do you always approach decision-making with transparency, equity and integrity?*

## **CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS**

The evidence that we have gathered from the Bible reveals a fascinating and important theology against corruption. This theology issues a strong call to us all to resist corruption

whenever and wherever we find it.

The Old Testament is very clear that God rules the world with justice and impartiality and he expects all those in authority to rule in a similar manner. The role of the prophets was to call the Kings back to their duty to rule the world as God would. Christians today should equally expect to adopt such a prophetic role, speaking into situations of power, and calling those within them to abandon self-interest and greed and to seek justice for all people instead.

The New Testament continues this theme and we can find evidence in the life and ministry of Jesus where he clearly proclaimed a similar message. Alongside this we also are drawn into seeing the catastrophic consequences of what happens when justice and impartiality are abandoned. The factors that caused Jesus' death are many and varied, but some of the most important arise out of the fear and self-interest of the Jewish authorities. This should surely encourage all of us to stand up and to resist the love of money, love of power and love of status that lies behind corruption; to think long and hard about the fears that cause otherwise just people to act with injustice and to pledge ourselves, as far as we can, to oppose corruption and partiality in whatever form we encounter it, in the name of him who came 'to testify to the truth'.

## **FOR ACTION - THE THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER CHALLENGE**

*What practical actions will you undertake to challenge corruption?*

*Some examples might be:*

- *Signing the Exposed Global Call*
- *Collecting signatures for the Exposed campaign amongst your friends, family and colleagues.*
- *Undertaking an audit on your personal finances and use of money - what do you spend it on and where do you spend it?*
- *Why not do the same for your Church community? What do you prioritise, and why?*
- *Challenging bribery by choosing an issue to campaign on or joining a campaign group.*

## **FOR PRAYER**

*Spend time in prayer, commending the victims of bribery and injustice into God's care, asking him to reveal where you might be complicit with bribery and injustice, and praying for God's kingdom of righteousness and justice to come.*



**[exposedcampaign.com](http://exposedcampaign.com)**  
**[biblesociety.org.uk/exposed](http://biblesociety.org.uk/exposed)**

We hope you have found this reflection document stimulating and helpful. If you have any questions or feedback about the work of Bible Society or would like to support us in some way, please contact:

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