

IRONY IN SCRIPTURE

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Irony is not only encountered in every-day life, we also find it in Scripture. “In common parlance, irony is the statement of one thing with the intention of suggesting something else. . . . Ironic incongruity underlines both the teachings of Jesus . . . and his fate As literature the scriptures are also filled with dramatic irony, in which the reader knows what the characters do not”¹

After the flood God promised not to send a worldwide flood again. But humans built a tower, maybe as a refuge for a future flood, to reach up to heaven and to make themselves a name. In spite of the gigantic building it was so little that God had to come down from heaven in order to be able to see it (Gen 11:5). The situation is described in ironic terms. When Nathan encountered David after his sins of adultery and murder and told him a story, unknowingly David condemned himself. Jonah could not escape God, and at the end he was fulfilling the commission which he hated and from which he was running. Peter claimed that he would defend Jesus with his own life. Yet he denied the Lord and fled (Mark 14:30). Paul appealed to Caesar in order not to be handed over to the Jews and be killed (Acts 25:11). However, at the end he was killed by Caesar. The Bible is full of irony.

Irony in the Life of Jesus

Unintentionally, the Jewish leadership of Jesus’ time made statements that were meant to be derogatory, and yet these very statements contain deep insights in the plan of salvation and Jesus’ life and ministry. According to Luke 15:2 the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” But this negative statement contains very good news. Because of what Jesus has done sinners like us have a chance.

In John 11:50 Caiaphas, the high priest, exclaimed at a council of the leadership in Jerusalem: “It is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.” John goes on to explain the irony of the situation in the next two verses.

There are strange sayings of Jesus. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, those who have started working last receive their wages first. And those who have worked for one hour receive the same amount as do those who have worked twelve hours. “The last will be first and the first last” (Matt 20:16). “Blessed are you poor” (Luke 6:20). “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” (Mark 8:35). Jesus’ life and fate is ironic. As the Messiah, the king of peace, who lived to serve and save others he is crucified. The crucifixion of the Savior is an irony.

Irony in Mark 15:31

The Gospel of Mark also has its share of irony. “In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes, were mocking Him among themselves and saying, ‘He saved others; He cannot save Himself’” (Mark 15:31).

The word translated “to save” can also be rendered “to deliver” or “to heal.” Before Jesus was born the angel declared that “He will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). In desperation during a storm the disciples exclaimed: “Save us, Lord; we are perishing!” (Matt 8:25), and Jesus stilled the storm. Jesus met people or they came to Him to be healed (Mark 3:4; 5:23, 28, 34; 6:56). Demoniacs were healed and delivered (Luke 8:36). Jesus raised a dead girl, but before doing that He promised her father that He would make her well again (Luke 8:50). Yet Jesus was not just concerned with physical healing, He brought about salvation for the individuals He met. “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). Jesus’ enemies acknowledged that He had helped and healed others. But they claimed that He could not save himself.

Could Jesus have left the cross and saved himself? Sure, He could have called to His help myriads of angels (Matt 26:53). He who had the power to lay down His life and who had the authority to take it up again (John 10:18), would not

¹ R.N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, third edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 2001), 88-89.

have had any problem to pull out the nails from the cross and ascend to heaven. So, the priests and scribes were wrong. Jesus had the power to save himself.

But again we ask: Could Jesus have left the cross and saved himself? And this time we have to answer: No. Because He was determined to save others, He could not save Himself. For Jesus it was an either-or situation not a both-and choice. Either He saved humanity or He saved Himself. Either Jesus died for us so that we might be free, or He saved Himself, and we have to face eternal death. Because Jesus is in the business of saving humans, because He loves humanity too much, He could not save Himself. So, after all, the priests and scribes were right, unknowingly. They made a statement about Jesus' nature and character which they themselves did not understand and comprehend. Their pejorative remark was correct. This is irony. Our salvation is ironic. "He saved others; He cannot save Himself."

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