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John 19:17-30

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John Hanneman

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THE DEATH OF THE KING

Two months ago, Sir Edmund Hillary passed away at the age of 88. Hillary is famous for being the first man, along with his climbing companion Tenzing Norgay, to climb Mt. Everest. Hillary wrote: "Awe, wonder, humility, pride, exaltation – these surely ought to be the confused emotions of the first men to stand on the highest peak on Earth, after so many others had failed." This feat was an incredible accomplishment, one for which Hillary earned knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

Since I take interest in sports and physical accomplishments, I marvel at what Hillary achieved. And yet this accomplishment pales in magnitude, influence, and significance when compared to what Jesus accomplished on the cross. At Calvary, Jesus was lifted to a height greater than Everest. He achieved what no man before him or since could ever accomplish, and that was redemption. Jesus didn't just conquer a mountain, he conquered sin and death.

The second half of John's gospel deals with the passion of Jesus. We are treading now on holy ground as we come to John's account of the crucifixion. The writer is very deliberate about what he includes in his story, and even though this account parallels Mark rather closely, there are some features distinctive to John alone.

So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified. They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha. There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between. (John 19:16-18)

This is a summary statement; what follows gives specific details. Following the trial, Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified. The "they" here refers to the Roman soldiers, not the Jews. At this point they probably administered the worst of the three scourgings, done with pieces of metal or bone attached to the ends of the whip.

Jesus bore his own cross. It was the typical Roman practice for the condemned person to carry the horizontal bar, the cross beam. The Synoptics record that Jesus suffered greatly as he carried his cross, so much so that Simon of Cyrene was enlisted to help him. The picture of Jesus bearing his own means of sacrifice reminds us of Isaac, who carried wood to the place of sacrifice – which almost became his own.

The upright beam would already have been in the ground at the execution site. Upon the criminal's arriving there he would lie on his back and his outstretched arms would be tied or nailed to the horizontal beam. Then he was hoisted up and the cross beam was fastened to the vertical beam, which always remained in place. The feet then were tied or nailed to that beam. Sometimes a piece of wood was attached to the upright beam to help to support the weight of the body, allowing the one being crucified to lift his body and take a breath, actually prolonging the agony of death.

The place of crucifixion was Golgotha, a word derived from an Aramaic word meaning "skull." "Calvary" derives from a Latin word

also meaning skull. The place of the skull is probably derived from its appearance. The actual location is in doubt, but the traditional site is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. According to all four gospels, two other men were crucified with Jesus. We are reminded of Isa 53:12: He "was numbered with the transgressors."

Crucifixion was associated with shame and horror. It is probably the cruelest method of execution ever practiced. It was so brutal that Roman citizens could not be crucified unless the sentence was sanctioned by the emperor. The victim was stripped naked and beaten to a pulpy weakness. He might hang in the hot sun for hours, even days. In order to breathe, the condemned had to push with his legs and pull with his arms to keep the chest cavity open and functioning. Terrible muscle spasms wracked the entire body. But since collapse meant asphyxiation, the strain went on and on. Death was delayed until the maximum torture had been inflicted. Cicero said about death by crucifixion: "there is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed."¹

Following the summary statement, John now describes several things in detail. We will look at four of these vignettes today. The first deals with the inscription placed on the cross.

Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS." Therefore many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews'; but that He said, 'I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." (19:19-22)

Traditionally, the crime for which the person was convicted was written on a tablet or placard which was hung about his neck or carried before him as he made his way to the place of crucifixion; then the placard was nailed to the cross.

John says that Pilate wrote the inscription or "title" for Jesus. Pilate may or may not have actually written it, but his words were used. The inscription was written in three languages: Aramaic, the language in common use in Judea; Latin, the official language of the army; and Greek, the language of the empire. In this way every segment of society could understand that Jesus had been found guilty of sedition.

The trial before Pilate centered on the kingship of Jesus. Pilate asked Jesus if he was the King of the Jews (18:33); the soldiers who flogged Jesus taunted him by shouting, "Hail, King of the Jews!" (19:3). The Jews and Romans hated each other. The entire interchange between Pilate and the Jews was filled with resentment. Pilate lost his duel with the Jews and was manipulated into sentencing Jesus to death, even though he was convinced he was not guilty. Pilate was a weak man, like many people who hide behind power. But he wanted to get the last word and so he put a title on the cross that would

anger the Jews. Pilate was a placater, one who gives in but eventually gets even. The Jews protest the sign, but Pilate wanted them to know they were helpless against the power of Rome.

The irony is that God is at work through Pilate's malice to declare the truth not only to Israel but the whole world. The truth is that Jesus is the king. The cross was the place of his enthronement and the means of his glorification. "The Crucified One is the true king, the kingliest king of all; because it is he who is stretched on the cross, he turns an obscene instrument of torture into a throne of glory and 'reigns from the tree.'"²

People are still speaking truth unknowingly. They make comments about God or Jesus or Christians in a sarcastic or malicious tone and yet they often speak better than they know. What they are saying is really true. Someone says jokingly, "I will probably go to hell for doing this." That may be true. "God probably sees everything I am doing." That is true. "Are you one of those born-again Christians?" Yes, you are. People who do not believe say true things about God all the time.

Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier and also the tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be"; this was to fulfill the Scripture: "THEY DIVIDED MY OUTER GARMENTS AMONG THEM, AND FOR MY CLOTHING THEY CAST LOTS." (19:23-24)

The fact that they made four parts of Jesus' outer garments means that there were four soldiers. The outer garment may have been cut and divided. However, the word "garments" is plural and may refer to Jesus' clothes – his belt, sandals, head covering, and outer garment. Perhaps each of the four soldiers received one item.

The tunic was a one-piece inner garment, worn next to the skin. It would have been wasteful to divide it, therefore the soldiers cast lots for it, thus fulfilling the word written in Psalm 22:18: "They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."

John understood this verse in Psalm 22 to refer to two distinct actions, one for the outer and one for the inner garments. Depending on how one interprets the parallelism, Psalm 22 might imply that the soldiers cast lots only for the tunic, or they did so for both the outer garments, each getting one piece of differing value, with one person gaining the tunic. (Garments and clothing are the same word in the Greek version of the Old Testament.)

Psalm 22, a psalm of the cross, begins with the words that Jesus cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." The events of the cross fulfill scripture; the gospels are very clear in pointing this out. The fact that scripture pointed to Jesus' suffering was critical to the evangelization of the Jews, since they wanted a triumphant king and Messiah.

Several suggestions have been offered as to the symbolism of the inner garment being made of one seamless piece. Some connect this to the robe of the high priest that was woven of one piece. Others see it as a symbol for the unity of the church – that those who belong to Christ, Jews and Gentiles, come to God in the same way and cannot be divided.

But what I find compelling is the link to John 13, where Jesus washes the disciples' feet. Jesus lays aside his garments in an act anticipating the cleansing that would issue from his death. The symbol

now becomes reality. Jesus lays aside all his clothing as he laid aside his divinity and his glory to secure our salvation.

Therefore the soldiers did these things. But standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" From that hour the disciple took her into his own household. (19:25-27)

The grammar of this text makes it clear that the women are set in contrast to the soldiers. On the one hand the soldiers did these things; on the other hand several women stood near the cross. The soldiers carry out their barbaric task and profit in Jesus' suffering; the women wait in faithful devotion. It's not clear how many women were at the cross. There are arguments for two, three or four. Most likely there were four women, two named and two unnamed, matching the number of soldiers.

Mary Magdalene is mentioned in all four gospels and also is prominent in Jesus' resurrection account (Luke 8:2). The mother of Jesus appears only in John's list. Mary, the wife of Clopas, may be Mary the mother of James and Joses. If we match the lists in Matthew and Mark (Matt 27:56-57; Mark 15:40) then Jesus' mother's sister would be Salome, the mother of James and John. If this is true, then Jesus and John were cousins; but there is no way of knowing for sure.

We assume that the disciple at the cross was John, the beloved disciple. The women were free to be at the cross because they weren't a threat. Because John was a young lad, apparently he wasn't a threat either, just as he had not been a threat at Anna's house. Peter has disappeared from the story for a while.

Jesus addresses his mother in the same manner as at the wedding in Cana (2:4). The language of "here is your son, here is your mother" is the language of legal adoption. What is amazing is that even in his suffering, Jesus took thought of and made provision for his mother. In the process, Isaiah 49:20 was fulfilled:

**"The children of whom you were bereaved will yet say in your ears,
"The place is too cramped for me;
Make room for me that I may live here."**

There are many suggestions as to the significance of this event. Catholic theologians see great significance in the role of Mary as the "mother" of the church. Others say that Mary must become a disciple in order for her to have a relationship with Jesus.

My own view is that the hour of Jesus' death becomes the hour for a new humanity and a new family. The hour was "not yet" at the wedding in Cana, but now the hour for the new creation symbolized in the turning of water into wine had arrived. Those who believe form a community defined as a spiritual family - spiritual brothers and sisters, spiritual mothers and fathers. This then provides a means of support and encouragement as we grow in Christ and do his work. Jesus prayed in John 17 that those who believed in him would become one. Unity in the body of Christ began at the cross.

Many are blessed with wonderful physical families but many are not. Even in good families there are obstacles to healthy relationships – disappointment, envy, resentment, etc. My wife and I don't dislike our families, but we celebrate the holidays and take vacations with our spiritual families. Our spiritual family is an indescribable

treasure. The relationships gained because of Christ are the most important thing in my life and have provided incredible models for my children. If you want to be blessed, start adopting people into your home.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, to fulfill the Scripture, said, "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon a branch of hyssop and brought it up to His mouth. Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. (19:28-30)

Jesus knew that all things were finished. Even on the cross he is aware of every detail and is in control of events.

Jesus said, "I thirst." In Sychar, where he had met a woman at a well, he asked for a drink. He exposed her thirst and offered her living water. Now he exposes his own thirst, demonstrating his full humanity. He had turned water into wine and offered living water. Now he is in the same place as every one of us – in need of what God can give. But Jesus has a different thirst: He thirsts to drink the cup the Father had given him. He thirsts to drink it to the bottom and finish the work for which he had been sent.

When Jesus says he thirsts, John declares that he was fulfilling Scripture. Several psalms could qualify (22:15; 42:2; 63:1, 69:21), but most likely this is a reference to Psalm 69:21: "They also gave me gall for my food/And for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." This psalm has already been cited twice in this gospel (2:17, 15:25).

The verb "to fulfill" is different from what we would expect. John does not use the normal word; instead he uses the word that means to complete, to bring to perfection. This final action of Jesus brings to completion the Father's work.

The soldiers offered Jesus cheap, sour wine which they themselves used. Wine mixed with myrrh (Mark 15:23) was a sedative designed to dull the pain. It would have the effect of prolonging life and therefore prolonging agony. (The same noun is used in Ps 69:21; the parallel passage is Mark 15:36.)

A sponge was soaked in the wine and placed on a branch of hyssop, a small plant that was used for sprinkling. Hyssop branches were used in Ex 12:22 for sprinkling blood on the lintels and doorposts. Some judge the plant too small to support the weight of the sponge, but the sponge would not have to be raised very high because Roman crosses were not tall. (Some think that the hyssop is mentioned as a link to the Passover, but sour wine is not a link to sprinkled blood.) What a contrast this is to John 2, where Jesus' offers the best wine. At the cross, the soldiers give him the cheapest wine.

After taking the wine, Jesus says, "It is finished." This is the same word that we saw for "accomplished" in verse 28. Both words are in the perfect tense, meaning that the work is completed but will have ongoing effects. Psalm 22 begins with the cry, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" The psalm ends with the words "He has performed it," or "He has done it;" i.e. "It is finished."

Jesus had come into the world for the purpose of going to the cross. That was his mission and he knew it. On several occasions he said so to his disciples. Now his work was done, it was finished. The Word became flesh and now it was time to return to God. Interestingly, this word also was written on a bill that had been fully paid. When Jesus cried out with his last breath, that marked the payment in full of the debt of sin.

Jesus gave up his life, his spirit. In the same way that he had been delivered over, he delivered it over. No one took his life. He had the authority to lay it down of his own accord (10:17-18).

John's account lacks the emotion of Jesus' agony. His emphasis is on the Father's sovereignty and the Son's obedience and kingship. But we don't want to read this text just for information. One of my wife's favorite poems, written by Jill Briscoe, puts us there on Calvary when Jesus was on the cross.³

Scourged my King, a plaited crown,
Runs the blood of Godhead down?
Ripped the flesh, the beard pulled out
Cruel the sport and rude the shout.
Scourged my King, a plaited crown,
Runs the blood of Godhead down?

Scourged my King in soldiers' den,
Exposed to beasts who, dressed like men,
Smelled the blood of prey soon caught
Set my Jesus all at naught!
Scourged my King, and fool of made,
God in heaven, what price You paid –
And all because of my heart's need:
Sinful thoughts and sinful deeds,
A dirty soul that dirtied Thee
O'er bloodied earth on bloodied tree,
Scourged my King, a plaited crown,
Runs the blood of Godhead down?

Scourged my King, a plaited crown –
Here I kneel a-trembling down,
Beat my fists in silent fury
While my world ignores your story;
Scourged my King, a plaited crown
Runs the blood of Godhead down?

Scourged my King, a plaited crown,
Runs the blood of Godhead down?
Can I doubt Your Father's loss?
Broken God on broken cross.
Do I bear wound or mark in me
That mirrors Thine on Calvary?
Scourged my King, a plaited crown
Runs the blood of Godhead down?

Why did Jesus die?

On the one hand he died because of you and me. Judas, the Jews, and Pilate worked to put Jesus on the cross. But we were there too: "A dirty soul that dirtied Thee." Jesus died for our sin and rebellion. He took on the wrath we deserved. He died on a cross because he was placed under the curse of God, the curse that the law demanded. We were there when they crucified our Lord. Imagine being at the wrong end of a gun and your life was about to end. At the last moment someone stepped between you and the gun and took the bullet you deserved and you were saved. Jesus took the bullet. Canon Peter Green well said: "only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross may claim his share in its grace."⁴

But on the other hand Jesus died because the Father asked him to go to the cross out of love. There was no other way to resolve God's

holiness and our depravity, to satisfy God's justice so that his love could be fully released. It had to be his Son, the Son who is God himself. The cross whispers to us, "I love you." It whispers to us of God's fathomless, inexhaustible love.

How should we respond? Let us stand, like those women, at the foot of the cross in wonder, devotion, amazement, and worship. The cross is the center of our faith. The cross defines who we are and how we are to live.

In the shadow of the cross we find that we have been completely forgiven, completely cleansed. No longer do we need to live in shame, guilt, condemnation, or regret. This is hard at times. There are things in our life that are dark and shameful. They plague us and hold us down. What do we do? We take these burdens to the cross and we leave them there. The debt has been paid in full. "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!" (Psa 32:1)

At the foot of the cross we no longer have to earn our worth or acceptance before God or anyone. The cross tells us that we are the precious people of God. The world does not give us our identity; the cross does that.

At the foot of the cross we rest in the finished work of Christ. We can find rest for our weary souls and contentment for our restless spirits. We can stop depending on ourselves, striving for a place to belong, working endlessly to be somebody. It is finished.

At the foot of the cross we can begin to value and invest in relationships with brothers and sisters in the body of Christ rather than playing games to make a profit. We are set free to love others and show them the grace and mercy we have received because of the cross. Instead of being critical and judgmental, pointing out one another's weakness so that we can feel better about ourselves, we can offer living water.

The cross keeps us centered and on track. Jesus was intentional about how he lived his life in obedience to the Father. His intention was to die on a cross. We too live intentional lives in obedience to the Father. Our intention is to live in the results, the power, and the glory of the cross of Christ.

*This, the power of the cross
Son of God - slain for us
What a love! What a cost
We stand forgiven at the cross.*

¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Madison, Wisconsin: IVP, 1986), 24.

² D. A. Carson (quoting Bruce), *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 611.

³ Jill Briscoe, *The Deep Place Where Nobody Goes: Conversations with God* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 63-64.

⁴ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 60.