



BENEATH THE CROSS OF JESUS

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 19:17-42

40th Message

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In our study this morning in the nineteenth chapter of the gospel of John, we come now to the events in the life of Jesus that Paul describes as the gospel which he preached. The apostle wrote in 1 Corinthians: *"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, . . ."* (1 Cor. 15:3-5). That gospel is made up of three elements: Jesus died; he was buried; he was raised again. These are the facts of the gospel, the crucial elements of the Christian faith.

Our text focuses on the first two of these elements, the death of Jesus and his burial. It is important to realize that these verses from John 19 are the testimony of an eyewitness. John says that he was there beneath the cross, an eyewitness of these events, and that he was telling the truth (verse 35). The credibility of any historical occurrence can be gauged by the veracity of the witnesses to the event. If the witnesses are reliable, then we can safely believe that the event actually happened. John witnessed a number of very interesting things on that unique occasion of the crucifixion of Jesus. Both the Jewish and Roman trials were over. Despite Pilate's acquittal of Jesus on all the trumped-up charges brought against him by the Jews, Pilate nevertheless handed him over to be crucified.

We begin reading at verse 17:

19:17 They [the Roman soldiers] 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.

A number of years ago I came across an article written by a medical doctor on the physiological effects of Roman crucifixion. It was instructive and very moving to learn the extent of the suffering that Jesus endured on our behalf. But what struck me as I reread the article last week was how spare John's account is of the suffering of Jesus. The text simply says that he was crucified. I think the reason behind this is that John had some other things to say about the crucifixion. Rather than elaborating on the trauma and pain of our Lord, John has his own images of that occasion that he wants to share. He was present, he saw everything that happened, and in this text he is sharing, as it were, his photo album of the snapshots he took as an eyewitness on that occasion.

Earlier, John said that the reason he wrote his book is that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. As we have already pointed out, the title "Son of God" is not a title of deity, but, rather, a Messianic title. John's concern is to establish that Jesus is the King of the Jews, the Messiah of Israel, the adopted son of God in the sense that kings were said to be adopted by the gods of those days. But specifically, John is saying that Jesus was the unique,

the only begotten Son of God, the Messiah. Everything written in this book is designed to convince us that this is so. John continually refers to the Old Testament in ways that only Jews would understand. Here in the Passion account, he wants Jews to know that this man who hung on the cross was nothing less than the Messiah of Israel, the one predicted in the Old Testament.

In light of that fact, John includes in his gospel some interesting things which the other gospel writers omit. Much of what took place in the hours when Jesus hung on the cross was predicted in the OT: the dividing of his clothes among the soldiers; the casting of lots for his seamless garment; the offering of wine for him to drink; the breaking of the thieves' legs and the decision not to break Jesus' legs; the piercing of his side with a spear. All of these things reported by John demonstrate that Jesus died "according to the Scriptures." John wants to assure us that God was in charge of these events, that the Scriptures do not fail, and that Jesus is indeed the anointed one of God, the Messiah.

The first thing that John saw is that Jesus "went out" of the city (verse 17). There was a reason for that. Under OT law, the carcasses of sacrificed animals were taken to a refuse dump outside the city and burned. The priest confessed the sins of the citizens on the head of the animal; the animal was then slain for their sins; and the defiled body on which all the sins were placed was taken outside the city and burned. The writer of Hebrews makes that exact point in chapter 13 in these words: *"The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood."* That was important to the writer of Hebrews, and it was important to John. He saw Jesus go outside the gate.

Further, John says that Jesus was crucified at "the Place of a Skull." John translates this name place into Aramaic, "Golgotha." This word describes a domed-shaped structure that evidently was a landmark in Jerusalem. Any Jew who visited the city and read these words would know where Golgotha was located. He might not know where "the Place of a Skull" was (because that was the Greek name given to the place), but he would immediately recognize the name "Golgotha." We don't know its exact location, but we do know that it was a little west of where the old city of Jerusalem stands today, on a part of Mt. Zion. Actually, Mt. Zion is a complex of hills on which the city of Jerusalem is located. Just a little beyond the wall lies Golgotha, which is a part of Mt. Zion.

This would be important to a Jew who was reading this account, because he would realize that Golgotha is a part of Zion, and he would know from the OT that Zion was the place where God intended to accomplish salvation. The prophet Joel put it this way: *"And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jeru-*

salem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls." Mt. Zion therefore is a geographical location. But symbolically, it stood for the place of salvation. Thus in John's reference to Jesus going outside the camp on his way to Mt. Zion, a Jew would know that the writer was pointing out that Jesus went up to Mt. Zion to provide salvation.

And John saw Jesus carrying the wood, carrying the cross, on his back. This would remind Jews of the occasion, two thousand years earlier, when Abraham and his son Isaac, who was carrying the wood for a sacrifice, made their way up that same hill to what was called then the "regions of Moriah," the hills on which Jerusalem would be located. Isaac said to Abraham, "Father, here is the wood. You have the fire, and the knife, but where is the sacrifice?" Abraham said, "God will provide a sacrifice, my son." When they got to the top of the hill, Abraham bound Isaac and placed him on the wood which he had carried. He started to plunge that knife made of flint into Isaac's chest, but the angel restrained him. God provided a ram as a substitute for his son. In memory of that event, Abraham named that place "Moriah," meaning, "the Lord will provide." Abraham knew that some day God would provide salvation on that mountain. But on that day an angel would not restrain the Father. He would kill his own Son, who would substitute for the human race.

When John saw Jesus carrying the wood, dragging the cross up the side of Mt. Zion, he would remember Isaac, and he would remember that that was the place where God determined to bring salvation.

Next, Pilate writes an inscription that is placed at the head of the cross of Jesus.

19:19 And Pilate wrote an inscription also, and put it on the cross. And it was written, "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS." Therefore this inscription many of the Jews read, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, {and} in Greek. And 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."

It was customary to put an inscription at the top of the cross, indicating the crime of which the criminal was convicted. The Romans called this a "titulus." (We get our word "title" from this word.) The titulus would say something like, "John Doe, Murderer," or "Pete Washington, Thief." For some reason, the Roman governor himself put this inscription on the cross, "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS." The Jews came to Pilate protesting, "Don't say that he is the King of the Jews. Say that was what he claimed." Pilate responded, using that phrase that has come to refer to things which cannot be changed, "What I have written I have written."

John saw the fine irony in all of this. Pilate did not write this inscription because he believed it. That's the odd thing. He was the one who asked, "What is truth?" But, unwittingly, he himself had written the truth: "This is the King of the Jews." And this was displayed in a public place, in all the languages of the Roman Empire of that day so that everyone could read it.

Today, there are a couple of places pointed out as the possible site of the crucifixion of Jesus. They are public plac-

es, and would have been public places in Jesus' day. In fact, below one of the sites there is a bus station. It is a bustling place, filled with noise and clatter. That was the way it was in Jesus' day. He was crucified in a public place, on a major thoroughfare. The title above him, written in languages that everyone could read, stated that he was "The King of the Jews." Pilate probably wrote this to irritate the Jews, but John says that it is true. Jesus is the King of the Jews. Perhaps John thought of Isaiah 9:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
And the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

[The one who makes peace. That is what a king is supposed to do.]

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
Establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness

From that time on and forever. (Isaiah 9:6,7a).

Next, John's eyes travel from the title above the head of Jesus to the foot of the cross, where four soldiers are dividing up our Lord's garments:

19:23 The soldiers therefore, 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. They said therefore to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, {to decide} whose it shall be"; that the Scripture might be fulfilled [It was John, not the soldiers, who added these words. The soldiers had no idea that they were fulfilling prophecy. They didn't even know the prophecy. But John noted that what they were doing was the fulfillment of what had been predicted long ago], "They divided My outer garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots." Therefore the soldiers did these things.

The clothing of the crucified was one of the perks of the executioners. They didn't want to tear our Lord's seamless tunic, so they cast lots, rolling dice to see who would get it. Later John realized that they were fulfilling something David had said a thousand years earlier, in Psalm 22. David used the phrase symbolically to refer to an experience that had drained him of strength, and the writers of Scripture realized that he was writing something that went beyond his own experience. The Holy Spirit was leading David to say things that were true of himself in part, but of the Lord Jesus in full. Here is what David wrote:

I am poured out like water,
And all my bones are out of joint;
My heart has turned to wax;
It is melted away within me.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
And my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.
You lay me in the dust of death.
Dogs have surrounded me;
A band of evil men has encircled me;
They have pierced my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones.
People stare and gloat over me.
They divide my garments among them,
And cast lots for my clothing. (Psalm 22:14-18).

As John saw these pagan soldiers unwittingly fulfilling this prediction, he realized that Jesus died "according to the Scriptures."

Then, looking away from the four soldiers at the foot of the cross, John sees four women.

19:25 But there were standing by the cross of Jesus His mother [Mary], and His mother's sister [Salome, most likely the mother of John, the author of this account], Mary the {wife} of Clopas, [who is believed to be the wife of Joseph's brother] and Mary Magdalene [Mary of Magdala, the social misfit, out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons.].

Dorothy Sayers says that it was no accident that women were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb, because they knew that Jesus was a man like no other man. And, she says, "indeed there has been none other like him."

Next, John's gaze focuses on Jesus' mother, standing by herself. Perhaps John remembered Simeon's words to her when she dedicated the child, whom he recognized as the Messiah, when he said to her, ". . . a sword will some day pierce your heart." As the heartbroken Mary stood by her son, her little lamb, on that cross, perhaps John went over to be by her.

Jesus saw them there together.

19:26 When Jesus therefore 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!" And from that hour the disciple took her into his own {household.}

We don't know why Jesus did not hand over his mother to his brothers and sisters. It's possible they were not even there. We know they did not believe in him until after the resurrection. John lived to be nearly 100 years old. We don't know how long Mary lived, but she lived with John for a long period of time. I wonder what it must have been like for John as he cared for Mary, knowing that she was the mother of his Lord. John includes this incident because it was important for him. He took Mary into his house.

This brings us to Jesus' last words.

19:28 After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, 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. When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head, and gave up His spirit.

Jesus said a number of things from the cross. These are often referred to as the "seven last words." He said of the men who had crucified him, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." To the thief who was crucified with him he said, "This day you will be with me in Paradise." To his mother he said, "Woman, behold, your son." He said to John, "Behold your mother." He cried out to his Father in heaven, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" And then, in the sixth word from the cross, he said, "I am thirsty." His tongue was cleaving to the roof of his mouth. He had been hanging on the cross from three to five hours. He had refused the drink of drugged wine that was usually given to the crucified. But now one of the soldiers took some of his own supply of wine (evidently it

was cheap wine, more vinegar than wine), soaked a sponge in it, placed the sponge on a hyssop branch and raised it up to the lips of Jesus. John remembered what David had said in Psalm 69, a thousand years before, prefiguring this scene:

Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless;
I looked for sympathy, but there was none,
For comforters, but I found none.
They put gall in my food,
And gave me vinegar for my thirst. (Psalm 69:20,21).

John continued to realize that Jesus died "according to the Scriptures."

And now Jesus' final word from the cross: "When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!'" Notice that he did not say, "I am finished." He said, "It is finished." The work that he came to do was finished, consummated. These three words in English are but one word in Greek (*tetelestai*), yet this word sums up the greatest work that has ever been done. Spurgeon said, "It would need all the other words that were ever spoken, to explain this one word. It is altogether immeasurable. It is high; I cannot attain to it. It is deep. I cannot fathom it." Phedipides ran one hundred miles in less than 48 hours to announce the victory of the Greeks over the Persians. As he entered the city of Athens, he cried out the one word, "Nike!" (victory), and he dropped over dead. For thirty-two years our Lord had run the race. He had done precisely and only what the Father had called him to do. He said only what the Father spoke, and did only what the Father instructed. Now it was the Father's will to bruise him, and he obediently went to the cross that he might provide the way of salvation for us. Now at last he could cry out in victory, "It is finished." Salvation had been accomplished.

Thus we have the first element of the gospel, that Jesus died "according to the Scriptures." John wants his readers to know that the death of Jesus on the cross actually happened. Our Lord did not merely faint. Without question, he had expired.

19:31 The Jews therefore, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high {day}), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and {that} they might be taken away.

Shock and asphyxia were the primary causes of death for the crucified. Normally it took from five hours to several days for the victim to die. At times, death was hastened by breaking the legs of the victim. A little platform was placed under the feet of the victim upon which he could push his feet, thus raising his body a few inches and enabling him to take a breath. To hasten death, the victim's legs were broken so they could not push up anymore, and death from asphyxiation would result. This was what the Romans intended to do to our Lord until they saw that he was already dead. He had made that cry of victory, "It is finished." One of the other gospel writers says that our Lord said to the Father, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." In reality, the executioners did not take Jesus' life. He said to Pilate, "No one takes my life." He willingly gave up his life.

Describing this scene now, John writes:

19:32 The soldiers therefore came, and broke the legs of the first man, and of the other man who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs; but one

of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water. It was blood and pericardial fluid from the lance wound. And John says: **And he who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe. For these things came to pass, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, "Not a bone of Him shall be broken."**

In the OT, the Jews were prohibited from breaking any of the bones of sacrificed animals — a strange, puzzling requirement that seems almost irrelevant in the Exodus account of the Passover feast. The reason for it, however, was that it prefigured the crucifixion of our Lord. His legs were not broken; instead, his side was pierced.

And John remembered Zechariah's words:

19:37 And again another Scripture says, "They shall look on Him whom they pierced."

John realized that that was exactly what Zechariah was talking about a little less than 500 years earlier when he wrote these words. God said: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. that they will look at him whom they have pierced."

The soldiers did this unwillingly. This came to pass that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.

Now we turn from the first element, that "Jesus died according to the Scriptures," to his burial:

19:38 And after these things Joseph of Arimathea [Arimathea was a town about 20 miles distant from Jerusalem], being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret {one}, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. He came therefore, and took away His body.

Normally the bodies of the crucified were buried in a common grave. If this practice had been followed, Jesus

would have been buried with the two criminals who were crucified with him. But Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin who had voted against Jesus' death sentence (he had been a secret disciple of Jesus all along) now comes out of the closet, so to speak:

19:39 And Nicodemus came also [Remember Nicodemus, from John 3. He was also a secret disciple], who had first come to Him by night; bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds {weight} [an enormous amount of costly perfume and spices. The Jews didn't embalm bodies; they anointed them in spices and wrapped them in linen wrappings.] And so they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had yet been laid. Therefore on account of the Jewish day of preparation, because the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

John notes that all of this took place in a garden. It was in a garden, of course, that everything began. That was where the human race got into the mess that we find ourselves in in the first place. And now in a garden, the problem is solved at last.

John wants his readers to know that Jesus died and was buried "according to the Scriptures." The Roman authorities crucified Jesus on Mt. Zion, the place on which the prophets said salvation would be provided. Jesus went up, carrying the wood, like Isaac, becoming the sacrifice that Isaac had prefigured. Pilate announced to the world that Jesus was "The King of the Jews." The soldiers divided the garments, gave him vinegar to drink, and pierced his side instead of breaking his legs, just as the Old Testament said they would.

That is what Paul meant, in 1 Corinthians 15, when he said that Jesus died, was buried, and was raised "according to the Scriptures." John was an eyewitness of these events. These are the facts of our faith, what we base our belief on. What a great comfort this is, to know we have been saved from our sin because "Jesus died for our sins, according to the Scriptures."

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