

John 19:16-37 – The Death of Jesus

The text that we're looking at this morning is John 19:16-37, which is John's account of the death of Jesus.

When you look at all of the different stories about the death of Jesus in the New Testament and you compare them with each other, there are three things that stand out:

1. The first thing that stands out is that when you look at all of the stories about the death of Jesus in the New Testament that they're basically telling the same story. There's a lot of overlap in how they tell the story because ultimately they're talking about the same event – something that actually happened in history.

2. The second thing that stands out is that every single account, except for maybe Matthew, seems to be based on different eyewitness accounts of the death of Jesus. You can tell that they didn't just get together and make up a good story because the stories aren't exactly the same. You can tell that they're all talking about the same event but there are differences that show that they're getting the information from different eyewitnesses. In fact, John talks about where he got his information from:

John 19:35 – The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. (Which is probably talking about John himself).

3. The thing that stands out is that each of the gospel writers try to tell the story in their own way, not just because they're basing their story on different eyewitness testimony but because they're trying to get different points across. So when we're looking at this story we're going to want to pay special attention to where John is different from the other gospels and it will help to see what John wants us to get out of the story.

So let's pick up the story where we left off last week. Last week we looked at the trial that Jesus had before Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman governor of Judea at that time. And even though Pilate knew that Jesus wasn't guilty and even though he wanted to have him released, the Jewish authorities put so much pressure on him that he had to put Jesus to death.

And one of the main points that we saw last week was that that wasn't an accident. Pontius Pilate and the Jewish authorities were responsible for everything that they did but over and above that, everything that was happening to Jesus was part of God's plan. This is the way that things had to happen so that our sins could be forgiven. And that's going to be one of the main points that John wants to get across when he's telling us about the death of Jesus – that it wasn't an accident, that it wasn't a plan that had gone horribly wrong – but that this was God's plan right from the very beginning.

So Pilate handed Jesus over to his soldiers to be executed. But there are two very important things that we need to notice right at the very beginning of the story in John 19:17-18:

1. The first thing that we need to notice is that John doesn't give us a lot of detail about what Jesus went through when he was executed. It simply says that they crucified him. And there are a couple of reasons for that. First, everyone already knew what crucifixion was and, second, crucifixion was something that people didn't like to talk about.

So even though John doesn't go into a lot of detail when he says that they crucified him we need to recognize that crucifixion was one of the worst ways that people could die in the Roman Empire. After Jesus was handed over to be executed he would have been whipped almost to the point of death, which explains why he died faster than the other two people who were crucified with him. And then they took thick nails and nailed him alive to the cross. And while he was hanging on the cross the weight of his body would have pressed down on the nails causing a horrible amount of pain and he would have had to push down on the nails just to be able to catch his breath.

This is what the Roman senator Seneca had to say about crucifixion in the first century:

Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed, swelling with ugly weals on shoulders and

chest, and drawing the breath of life amid long-drawn-out agony? He would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross.¹

So even though John doesn't get into a lot of detail we have to remember that this was a horrible way to die.

2. The second thing that we need to notice is that in verse 17 it says that Jesus was carrying his own cross, which is probably talking about the cross beam and not the whole cross. But when you look at Matthew, Mark, and Luke it says that the soldiers made another person, Simon of Cyrene, carry the cross for Jesus. So why does John say that Jesus was carrying his own cross?

Well there's probably two reasons for that. First of all, Jesus did carry his own cross, at least for part of the way to the place where he was executed. But he was probably so weakened by being beaten so badly and from the whipping that he couldn't carry it all of the way. So they got Simon of Cyrene who was just passing by to carry the cross for him the rest of the way.

But there's probably another reason why John said that Jesus was carrying his own cross. He was probably trying to show again that Jesus's death wasn't an accident – he willingly took up the cross and went to the place where he died. He wasn't trying to run away, he wasn't trying to avoid the cross – he went to his death willingly so that we could be saved.

So Jesus took up his cross and went to the place where they crucified him, which was called the place of the Skull, which in Aramaic was called Golgotha and in Latin is called Calvary. And they crucified him there with two other people, one on his left and one on his right. The difference between Jesus and the other two people is that the other two people were being killed for something they had actually done while Jesus was innocent. Like Isaiah said in Isaiah 53:12, Jesus was numbered among the transgressors – he was killed along with two other criminals even though he hadn't done anything.

In verse 19 it says that Pilate fastened a sign to the cross. That was a normal thing that was done back then so that people would know what the person was being executed for. People weren't executed back then just to punish the person – it was

¹ Quoted from Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*.

also supposed to be a warning for everyone else – if you try to do the same thing, this is what’s going to happen to you.

So he fastened a sign written in three languages: Aramaic, Greek, and Latin. Aramaic was the main language that people spoke in Judea at that time – and that was the language that Jesus spoke. Greek was the most common language that people could speak in the Roman Empire. It was like English today. And Latin was the language that was spoken in Rome.

And the sign said, “King of the Jews”. That was the charge that Jesus was convicted for – saying that he was the king of the Jews. And we saw last week that that was a serious charge because if you were calling yourself the king of the Jews, normally that meant that you were trying to raise up an army and fight against the Roman Empire. So this was a warning to anyone who would want to fight against Rome – don’t fight against us or you’ll end up like him.

But when the Jewish authorities saw the sign they complained to Pilate and said, “Don’t say that he was the king of the Jews. Say that he claimed to be the king of the Jews.” That would have been an insult to them. But Pilate didn’t really care about them. He wanted them to know that that was the best that they could do – have a beaten up and crucified king. So Pilate said, “What I have written I have written.”

But the interesting thing is that that sign was a lot more accurate than any of them realized. That was the best they could do – having a king die for them so that they could be saved.

So while Jesus was suffering and dying on the cross, the Roman soldiers who were there divided up Jesus’s clothing so they could keep it. They were playing around while the Son of God was dying on the cross. But the undergarment was a single piece and it didn’t have a seam so they decided to roll dice for it. That’s something that all of the gospels tell us about. But John is the only one to tell us why that was important.

John 19:24b – This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled which said, “They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.”

That's a quotation from Psalm 22:18, the same Psalm that begins with the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The point that John is trying to make is the same point that he's being trying to make the whole time – that this was the way things had to happen. This was something that had already been predicted way back in the Old Testament and now it was happening. The cross wasn't an accident – it was something that was supposed to happen.

And then in verse 25 John gives us a detail that we don't see in any of the other gospels. It says that there were four women standing near the cross: Mary, the mother of Jesus; Mary's sister; Mary the wife of Clopas; and Mary Magdalene (who, by the way, was not Jesus's wife).

John 19:26-27 – When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Now of course the Roman Catholic Church tends to make a really big deal out of this. The beloved disciple isn't just the Apostle John, he represents all believers. So when Jesus was saying to Mary, "Here is your mother" he was saying to the entire church, "Here is your mother." And they will also say that the suffering that Mary experienced while watching Jesus on the cross worked for our salvation. But that's not what the text is saying. It's saying that even when Jesus was in agony on the cross, he wanted to make sure that someone was taking care of his mother. He had brothers who could have done it but he wanted to make sure that John took responsibility for her – and he did.

And in verse 28 John mentions the only detail about the kind of suffering Jesus was experiencing:

John 19:28 – Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty."

Jesus wouldn't have had anything to drink for hours and he would have been completely dehydrated. And when you add in all of the other pain he was experiencing that would have been pretty unbearable. But he didn't just mention that detail because Jesus was thirsty. It was another thing that had to happen so that

the scripture could be fulfilled. It doesn't tell us exactly what verse he's talking about but he was probably talking about Psalm 69:21:

Psalm 69:21 – They gave me poison for food and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

That's the same word that's used in verse 29:

John 19:29 – A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on the stock of the hyssop plant, and lifted it up to Jesus's lips.

Again, the point is that the crucifixion wasn't an accident; it was part of God's plan right from the very beginning. It had to happen this way so we could be saved.

John 19:30 – When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

There are two things that are worth thinking about here.

(a) **First of all, Jesus said, "It is finished".** What did he mean by that? He meant that everything that needed to happen according to God's plan had now been accomplished. That's the same word that's used in verse 28 when it talks about scripture being fulfilled. All of the prophecies had been fulfilled and our sins were being paid for. The whole reason why he came to this earth was just about over and now there was only one more thing that had to be done – he needed to die.

(b) **The second thing worth thinking about is the fact that Jesus did die.** If Jesus was just an ordinary person this wouldn't be that unusual. But we always need to keep in mind who Jesus is. He is God in human flesh. It wasn't just anyone who died on the cross – it was God who died on the cross. That's something that's difficult for us to understand. But it simply means that he gave up his spirit and the physical part of him died. But that shouldn't minimize the fact that God came down to earth and died. He did that so we could be saved.

So because it was the Sabbath the next day, the Jewish authorities didn't want to leave the bodies on the cross till the next day so they asked that Pilate have their legs broken to speed up their deaths.

But when they came to Jesus, they found that he was already dead. They stuck his side with a spear and blood and water came out but he didn't move. And John makes two comments about that:

(a) That this happened so that his bones wouldn't be broken, just like the lamb of the Passover. He was paying for the sins of the world.

(b) A quote from Zechariah 12:10 – “They will look at the one they have pierced.”

The interesting thing about the Zechariah 12:10 passage is that there is a way of reading the text where God is the one who was pierced.

So Jesus died and to his disciples it looked like everything was over – it was time to go back to what they were doing before they followed Jesus. But, as we're going to see next week, that was just the beginning.

Things to learn:

1. The first thing we can learn from this text is that no matter how big any of our other problems might be, the biggest problem that we face in this life is the problem of sin.

2. The second thing we can learn from this text is that the problem of sin is so serious that the only thing that can deal with it is the death of the Son of God on the cross.

- ▶ If there was any other way for sin to be paid for then God would have found a way. If there was anything that we could have possibly done to save ourselves from our sin then God wouldn't have sent His Son to die on the cross.
- ▶ The fact that God went to that extreme to save us from the penalty of our sin and to make us right with him shows that this is the only way that it could have possibly happened.
- ▶ That's why John emphasizes over and over again, “This happened so that this scripture could be fulfilled” and how when people were doing their best to stop this from happening, they were overruled and Jesus was crucified. It's because it had to happen this way otherwise our sins could never be forgiven.

- ▶ We needed to have someone die in our place and take the punishment that we deserved. But it couldn't just be anyone. It had to be the sinless lamb of God. It had to be God in human flesh taking on the punishment that we deserve to receive.

Psalm 49:7-8 – No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him – the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough.

- ▶ But we can be thankful that when Jesus died on the cross and said, “It is finished” that that payment was enough and he was able to ransom everyone who puts their faith in him.

3. The third thing that we can learn from this text is how ridiculous and insulting it is to God think that anything else besides the death of Jesus could take care of the problem of sin in our lives.

Galatians 2:21 – I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!

- ▶ Or you could say, “If righteousness could be gained through simply being a good person, Christ died for nothing!”
- ▶ Or “If righteousness could be gained by feeling bad for my sin and trying to make up for it, Christ died for nothing!”
- ▶ Or “If righteousness could be gained by any other way that people try to gain it apart from the cross, Christ died for nothing!”
- ▶ When you look at the cross you see how serious sin is. When you look at the cross you see how impossible it is for us to deal with the problem of sin on our own. When you look at the cross it should strip us of any thought that we don't need Christ or that we can add anything to what he did for us and make us come to God solely on the basis of what Christ has done for us.

4. The fourth thing that we can learn from this text is how much we owe Christ for what he did for us.

2 Corinthians 5:15 – And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

- ▶ You can't look at the cross and say, "God, I think I'll give you one hour a week of my life." You can't look at the cross and say, "Maybe I can give you 50% of my life and work you in when it's convenient."
- ▶ The Son of God took on human flesh, was whipped and beaten and insulted, was nailed to a piece of wood and left there to die and he did it for you so that you could spend eternity with God and not have to experience an eternity in hell.
- ▶ You just have to look at what Jesus saved us from – an eternity in hell – and you'll want to give everything to him. You just have to look at what Jesus saved you for – an eternity in the presence of the living God – and you'll want to give everything for him. And you just have to look at the price that Jesus paid to win you that and you'll want to give everything for him.

Galatians 2:20 – I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Well, when Jesus died on that Friday, no one had any clue what it really meant. They thought that was the end of things. But three days later Jesus's body was missing and it was going to change everything.