

The Triumph of His Death (John 19:16-37)

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If you drive out of our neighborhood on Queensgate Road, you'll see a large, illuminated sign in one of the last front yards. In large letters, it reads: "Joy – Peace – Believe - Christmas." Whenever I pass it, my heart is both encouraged and saddened. I am encouraged because there is a good and glorious reason to be filled with joy, peace, and faith during Christmas. I am saddened because the sign fails to explain the reason.

In many ways, it's the spirit of our age. Deep inside, we long for joy. We long for peace. We long for something real to believe and build our lives on. But we don't know where to find it. Go to the mall, walk into Starbucks, and what do you see? All the festive trappings of Christmas suggest there's something going down this time of year worth celebrating, but we're not sure what it is.

The Bible has an answer to that question and it's not about the resilience of the human spirit or believing in our better angels. The joy, peace, and hope for tomorrow that Christianity offers has everything to do with an announcement found in Jn 1, words we read nearly two years ago when we began our study of John's gospel.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (Jn 1:14, 16-18). Or as the angel declares in Lk 2:11, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Here's the reason for joy, peace, and faith at Christmas. The God who created the world has not abandoned us in our broken estate, estranged from him and one another. He has come to us. He has walked among us. And he carried our griefs and sorrows to the cross to bear our curse and die our death that the judgment of God might not be the final word over our life.

In a very real sense, Jesus was born to die. It's why he came into the world in the first place. His death in Jn 19 is the moment the entire gospel has been anticipating and building toward. For what Jesus accomplishes here is what makes Christmas good news. We need a Savior and in Jesus, God himself has become the Savior we need.

If you know something about photography or art, you may be familiar with the idea of a focal point. It's the part of an image that's most in focus, the center of attention or interest. The focal point of the entire Bible, John included, is the sacrificial death of Jesus. It's what happens right here in Ch. 19. So what comes into focus when we follow John's lead in directing our gaze to calvary? At least six considerations come into view. Let's briefly consider each of them, recognizing we will never plumb the depths of what our Savior has accomplished for us.

1) CONSIDER THE WEIGHT OF HIS CROSS

As v. 17 begins, Jesus has already been flogged and beaten. The blood loss is extensive. The physical damage to his body is severe. And now the Roman soldiers compel Jesus to walk to "the place of a skull" just outside Jerusalem where they crucify notorious criminals, "bearing his own cross."

That's not an insignificant detail, friends. It speaks to the willingness of Christ's suffering. He didn't go kicking and screaming. He fully and literally embraced the Father's will for his life, even when it came at a tremendous cost. Yes, he was horribly abused at the hands of wicked men. They felt like they were doing to him whatever they pleased. But Jesus isn't ultimately obeying them. He's obeying his Heavenly Father who planned from eternity past to rescue sinners like us through the death of his Son.

For make no mistake, though it was "his own cross," it was ours first. Ours was the guilt. Ours was the condemnation. And he willingly carried it for our sake. Heb 13:11-12 compares Jesus' actions here to the animal sacrifices on the Day of Atonement under the Old Covenant. "For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a

sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.”

Suffer he did, friends. Crucifixion was arguably the worst penalty Rome could inflict. In fact, it was so gruesome, so painful, that Roman citizens were not allowed to be crucified unless the emperor himself expressly authorized it. When they crucified Jesus, they stripped him naked, nailed his hands to a horizontal beam, and dropped into a slot on a vertical post, to which they nailed or tied his feet. To take a full breath, you had to either pull up with your arms or push up with your legs, both of which created excruciating pain. After hours or days of exposure, victims eventually died of asphyxiation. It was a slow and prolonged death by design.

But Jesus’ physical suffering in the following hours was nothing compared to the divine judgment he endured. Have you ever felt a crushing weight of guilt for something you know you did wrong? Imagine bearing the cumulative weight of the sin of the world, past, present, and future. And then over the course of several hours the Father poured out the fury of his righteous wrath for every evil thought and every evil deed. It wasn’t ultimately the Romans who killed him. It was God himself. Isa 53:10, “It was the will of the Lord to crush him.” Such was the weight of his cross.

To which we say, “Thank you, Jesus, taking care of all that sacrificial stuff so we could live victorious lives of health, comfort, and prosperity.” Heb 13:13 begs to differ. “Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.” Lk 14:27, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

Wait, I thought the whole point of Jesus’ bearing a cross was so we wouldn’t have to? In the sense of God’s wrath being fully satisfied, absolutely. But not in the sense of laying down our lives in obedient submission to the Father’s will no matter the cost. In that sense, friend, we are called to follow him. That’s what it means to follow him.

It means dying to our sinful desire and affections. It means dying to our infatuation with our own glory, our own ease, our own reputation, living a

cruciform life of absolute surrender to God's priorities and purposes. For the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross. In response to his great love for us, the Lord invites us to do the same, friends. Humble gratitude and willing obedience are the defining marks of those who consider the weight of his cross.

2) CONSIDER THE AUTHORITY OF HIS REIGN

Crucified criminals typically had a placard with the nature of their offense fixed to the cross as a deterrent for all who passed by. In Jesus' case, Pilate writes the following. V. 18, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." It's a political shot across the bow at the Jews who pressured him into condemning Jesus. As D.A Carson observes, "[Pilate] is determined to humiliate those who have humiliated him."

"You want me to crucify Jesus? Fine. I'll show you what I think of all your purported 'kings.' None of them stand a chance against Roman authority." And yet, as happens repeatedly in John, the man spoke better than he knew. For Jesus isn't just the rightful king of the Jewish people. He's the king of universe. John recognizes the irony. Pilate's mocking Jesus and the Jews in an many languages as possible – Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. But what's the Lord doing? He's ordaining praise out of the mouths of sinful men, declaring his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.

V. 20, "Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city..." In the eyes of Jews and Romans alike, a crucified king was a contradiction in terms if there ever was one. But not in the wisdom of God, friends. For it was through his crucifixion that King Jesus inaugurated his redemptive rule. He crushed the power of sin and death. He disarmed the spiritual forces of evil. And he proved that the wickedness of human rebellion is no match for the covenant faithfulness of God.

When we behold the Son hanging on the cross, we behold the greatest victory King Jesus ever accomplished. F.F. Bruce is right, "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.'"

We tend to conclude on account of our own suffering that God must not be in charge. God must not be on his throne. How can Christ be King if this is happening to me? Remember the triumph of calvary, friend. Remember the authority he exercised at the cross. Ours is a God who demonstrates the might of his sovereign arm by taking the worst acts of evil and redeeming them for his glory and our good.

The words Pilate refused to alter point to the eternal truth of Ps 93:1-2, words that remained true even in the hour of Jesus' greatest suffering. "The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed; he has put on strength as his belt. Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved. Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting."

Jesus is not holding on for dear life when human injustice and oppression rear their ugly head or ruling despite the actions of sinful men. He exercises his reign through them. He triumphs in the midst of them. As surely as he magnified his glory through the mockery of those who murdered him, so too will he bear witness to his power through your suffering, Christian. Consider the authority of his reign.

3) CONSIDER THE FULFILLMENT OF HIS WORD

After crucifying Jesus, the soldiers divide his garments among them. On one level, it seems strange for John to linger for two whole verses on what seems like a relatively minor detail. Of all the things you could bring into focus when Jesus is crucified, why bother with what they did with his clothes? John lingers here, friend, to emphasize a pattern that's held true for Jesus' entire life and only intensifies during his final hours.

Both everything that happened to him and everything he did went down in accordance with biblical prophecies recorded hundreds and even thousands of years beforehand. And it wasn't just the big events. It was the little details. Take Ps 22 for example.

King David wrote it around 1000BC. It describes his experience as a righteous sufferer, sorely attacked and oppressed by his enemies to the point of death. It's the story of God's people throughout history. But it's not just David's story or our story. Ultimately, it's Jesus' story, David's Greater Son. He is the righteous sufferer without equal. Listen to what David says in Ps 22:18, "They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."

That's exactly what happened to Jesus and John recognizes it! Even the way the soldiers divide Jesus' clothing isn't a random thing or a chance thing. Are they doing exactly what they wanted to do? Yes. But what are they unwittingly doing at the exact same time? They're fulfilling the Word of God. They're proving the trustworthiness of his promises.

You could read what Pilate did with the placard above Jesus and think, "Well, that's just an ironic twist of fate." But how about the way they divide his garments in v. 24 in fulfillment of Ps 22:18? Or the way they give him sour wine to drink in v. 28 in fulfillment of Ps 69:21? Or the way they don't break any of Jesus' bones in v. 33 in fulfillment of Ex 12:46, Num 9:12, and Ps 34:20? Or the way they pierce Jesus' side with the spear in v. 34 in fulfillment of Zech 12:10?

Four times Jn 19 Jesus says, "This was to fulfill the Scripture," "to fulfill the Scripture," or "These things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled." The cross of Christ doesn't just suggest God is worthy of our trust. It shouts it over and over again, both in the big events and the little details of how they come to pass, including the actions of sinful men.

Remember that, friend. The fact that everything taking place in this chapter goes down the exact way God said it would go down confronts us with the glory of a God who keeps his promises and works all things according to the counsel of his will. When God says in his Word that something will happen, it always happens.

His Word is worthy of your trust, friend. So when you come across something specific in God's Word that you don't like, or is hard to understand, or has yet

to come to pass, and you think, “Man, why should I believe that?” Remember the cross of Christ. Remember how promises God made ages beforehand came to pass exactly as he said – not by accident or chance, but because God is self-consciously fulfilling his Word.

4) CONSIDER THE TENDERNESS OF HIS CARE

In v. 24, John draws a sharp contrast between the soldiers crucifying Jesus and the women standing to support him. V. 25, “But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Their steadfast loyalty to Jesus is all the more striking given how many of his followers fled when he was arrested. Even his main man Peter disowned him. But not this group.

And when Jesus sees them, he does something that gives us a precious window into the heart of God. In the midst of excruciating physical pain, with the sin of the world on his shoulders, the One who continued to hold the universe together stopped to care for his mom. John doesn’t come out and say this, but the clear assumption in vv. 26-27 is that his adoptive dad, Joseph, has died. And Jesus knows the 5th commandment. Ex 20:12, “Honor your father and your mother.”

He knows he has a God-given responsibility to physically provide for his mom. As the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Tim 5:4, “If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.” So what does Jesus do? He entrusts his mother, Mary, to “the disciple whom he loved,” presumably John. To her he says, “Behold, your son!” To him he says, “Behold, your mother!”

Even at the height of his suffering Jesus never used his suffering as an excuse to avoid doing his Father’s will. He didn’t say, “You know what, God, I’m dealing with a lot of issues right now. When life settles down a bit, then I’ll get back to obeying your Word in the whole ‘caring for your parents’ area.” No, loved to the very end. His righteousness, even in suffering, was perfect. With

everything else he had going on, he didn't lose sight of Mary's physical needs.

It would have been easy, right? What's one woman's need for physical provision when you're literally in the middle of saving the world? Jesus doesn't cut his losses. He's the God who stops even for one. He sees you too, friend. Even if you're a widow. Even if you're increasing in age and largely dependent on other people to take care of you. You are not invisible to Jesus.

And he doesn't just have eyes for your "spiritual" welfare. He cares for your finances. He cares for your housing. He cares for your body. The tender care the Lord demonstrates here is breathtaking. He's the same God today, my friends. You can trust him to care for you too.

What Jesus does here in setting the solitary in a family, uniting John and his mom to one another in the context of shared loyalty to him, is a beautiful picture of the end result of the gospel. When we trust Jesus to make you right with God, he doesn't just reconcile us to himself. He reconciles us, he unites us, to one another as members of his body, the church. He creates a new kind of family bound together by shared devotion to Him.

We cannot heal what only Jesus can restore. Don't ask the church to be your functional savior. We're sinners like you who need a Savior. But one of the sweet ways Jesus saves and cares for us is through the spiritual family of his people. He knows our frame. He knows our need for human companionship.

He didn't say to Mary, "Surely, mom, I'm enough for you!" No, he led her to John who took her into his own home. In obedient response to Jesus' love for us, may we do the same for one another again and again, brothers and sisters. Consider the tenderness of his care.

5) CONSIDER THE PERFECTION OF HIS WORK

Look at v. 28. "After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished..." Knowing what was finished? Jn 17:4, all the work of salvation for mankind the Father sent him to accomplish. Through his perfect obedience in life and death, he earned a spotless righteousness for us in the Father's sight. As he hung suspended between heaven and earth, he received in his body and soul the divine judgment we deserve. He atoned for our guilt. He paid our debt. No more sacrifice for sin remained.

And Jesus knew it. He saw the finish line. He knew his saving mission had been accomplished. And with blood dripping from his mutilated body, he asked for a drink for his parched throat that he might cry out the best single word the world has ever heard or will ever hear. "Tetelestai" – v. 30 – "It is finished."

Not, "Well, that's all I can do," or, "Father, you'll have to take things over from here," or, "Sorry I couldn't stay longer guys." No. Mission accomplished. Work completed. Redemption secured. Death defeated. Salvation won. Hell defeated. Heaven opened. What God promised all the way back in Gen 3:15, that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of Satan, the ancient serpent, Jesus brought to pass.

He didn't do it the way the Jews expected. He didn't come to rescue them from physical slavery to the Romans. He came to rescue them from spiritual slavery to sin and death! And in the process, he inaugurated a cosmic renewal where one day, all things will be made new in a physical sense. For now, we're waiting to see it come to pass, but the necessary work is complete. No more sacrifice for sin remains.

Heb 10:11–14, "And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."

Friends, when Jesus sits down, it's not because he's tired. Or because he needs a break. It's because no more work remains. And it's what makes a legal spirit, an attitude that tries to earn or maintain love and favor from God through obedience to God, an affront to the glory of Christ.

We do it even in subtle ways. Say I make a mistake and don't do something I told my wife I would do. How should I respond? I should apologize, receive the gift of her forgiveness, and move on. What am I sorely tempted to do? To try and atone for my iniquity by doing all kinds of good things to make up for my sin. I'll clean things she didn't ask me to clean. I'll work extra hard to keep the boys from bothering her. I'll offer to cook dinner. I basically put myself on a self-imposed relational probation and do penance until I feel like I've adequately repaid my debt.

What's the problem with that kind of response to the conviction of sin? I'm essentially saying, "Jesus, I know you said the work of salvation is finished, that no more sacrifice for sin remains, but I think you failed to bear some of the suffering I deserve. I think you failed to earn a bit of righteousness I need to earn. I mean, I'm really grateful for all you've done. But God helps those who help themselves, right?"

Why do I desperately want to add a little work of my own into the mix? Is it not because of the pride in my heart that wants the ego boost of knowing I contributed something to my salvation? Lord have mercy. It feels humble to walk around with our heads hung low, beating ourselves up for all we've done wrong, saying things like, "I just can't forgive myself." In reality, friend, it's the height of pride.

Behind every human attempt at self-atonement is a lingering unbelief in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. We display the same attitude when we put other people who have sinned against us on relational probation, forcing them to grovel in the dust before we're willing to forgive them. Whether we have sinned or been sinned against, how foolish for us to try and finish or make someone else finish what Jesus has declared is already finished. Consider the perfection of his work and rest in him alone for salvation.

6) CONSIDER THE FULNESS OF OUR SALVATION

In v. 32, the soldiers approach Jesus to break his legs. The Jews wanted him to die faster so his body could be taken away before the Sabbath day of the Passover festival. But the soldiers discovered he had already died. So they didn't break his legs. Why is that significant? Because the law forbade Israel from breaking the bones of the Passover lamb. Did the soldiers know or even care about that? Of course not. But the Lord did. Even in the details of his death, the Father guarded Jesus' identity as the Passover Lamb, a final sacrifice that would cause God's judgment to pass over his people.

Just to make sure he was dead, the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear. V. 34, and "at once there came out blood and water." It's a picture of the fulness of our salvation. The second scripture John quotes and sees fulfilled when Jesus' side is pierced comes from the Zech 12:10. Listen to how the Lord describes the coming day of salvation for his people several hundred years before Jesus is born.

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn."

The "spirit of grace and pleas for mercy" is a heart of repentance. It's a heart attitude God promised to work in his people, a heart that grieves the guilt of our sin. But notice how the Lord also promised their sorrow for sin would have a focal point. "When they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him..." Who does the Lord say will be pierced by his rebellious people? It's not a random "him," the Lord says. "It's me." It's God himself.

The Lord promised a coming day when his people would recognize the true depth of their guilt, a guilt culminating in responsibility for the firstborn Son of God himself. And on that day, when they come to their spiritual senses, so to speak, and cry out to the Lord for mercy, what will happen? In Zech 13:1,

“On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.”

The water and blood flowing from Jesus’ wounded side represent that fountain of salvation, friends. A fountain that washes away the stain of our “sin and uncleanness” once and for all. Recall the Lord’s promise to the Samaritan woman in Jn 4:14, “But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

When Jesus died, he became for us a fountain of living water, the water of salvation, the assurance of eternal life with God! The water is mixed with blood because it’s through his death that we find life. And it’s a fountain that never runs dry, not because Jesus remains on the cross or is still suffering on account of our sins, but on account of the infinite worth of his sacrifice.

You will never discover or commit a sin that’s too big to be plunged beneath that cleansing flood. So don’t hold back. Don’t try to clean yourself up. If you know you are a sinner and feel the weight of your sin, come to Jesus. He has done all that is necessary for you to be forgiven and restored to God. Such is the fullness of our salvation.

CONCLUSION

In view of the weight of his cross, the authority of his reign, the fulfillment of his word, the tenderness of his care, the perfection of his work, and the fullness of our salvation, let us resolve to run to Jesus, holding fast to him with grateful love and humble awe at the God who died that we might live. The sacrificial death of Jesus is the focal point of true faith in him. That’s the message of Jn 19.

As John writes in v. 35, speaking of his apostolic authority, “He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth – that you also may believe.” That’s the divinely intended effect of considering his sacrificial death in all its glory – faith in Jesus. Let’s pray and ask the Lord to work that faith in our hearts right now.