

The King on a Cross

John 19:17-27

One commentator so well remarks about our text this morning that, “He that can read a passage like this without a deep sense of man’s debt to Christ, must have a very cold, or a very thoughtless heart. Great must be the love of the Lord Jesus to sinners, when He could voluntarily endure such sufferings for their salvation. Great must be the sinfulness of sin, when such an amount of vicarious suffering was needed in order to provide redemption.”

We have been studying this gospel of John since April 2017, over a year and a half ago. After 68 previous sermons, we come to that most horrible of all human events, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. As a child, I always wondered why the day which corresponds to Jesus’ death in our own age is called Good Friday. What was so good about it? What is so good about a man being put to death?

I understand the answer to that question now. This man who was put to death was the atoning sacrifice for our sins. And, that man was, and IS, God’s anointed king. Therefore, the events that are before us this morning describe,

I. THE CRUCIFIED KING.

I have emphasized Jesus’ identity as a king each of the last two weeks, for that kingly theme has such prominence in John’s gospel. It had such prominence at that time. Make sure that you understand it well, that this is a King who is being put to death. He is the king of a heavenly, spiritual kingdom.

v.17-19

Let’s focus first on the details of the crucifixion. Specifically,

A. The ugly humiliation of the crucifixion.

It happened at a place called “the place of a Skull.” The Hebrew word is Golgotha. We don’t know exactly what the significance of that name is, and I will refrain from speculating. Speculations of others prove only uncertain foolishness. Some think that the place looked like a skull. Some think the skull of Adam had been discovered there. Some think that because it was a place of execution, skulls could be seen lying about.

None of those ideas is worthy of serious study, but it is useful to note that the Latin translation for this Hebrew word Golgotha, is the word for Calvary, a word obviously familiar in our vocabulary. So let me emphasize what was important about this place of the skull, more than the fact that it’s Latin name is a common church name in America today. What is important is that Golgotha was outside the city!

The sin offering, according to OT law, had to be made outside the camp! As a sign of reproach, a symbol of condemnation and judgment. We read in,

Lev. 16:27 “The bull for the sin offering and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the Holy Place, shall be carried outside the camp. And they shall burn in the fire their skins, their flesh, and their offal.”

And with NT explanation, we read,

Heb. 13:12 “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate.¹³ Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.”

And so the Lord Jesus, to perfectly fulfill the righteousness of the OT laws, and to perfectly satisfy all the requirements of the true sin offering, suffered outside the city, outside the city gates, outside the camp.

And suffer he did! Crucifixion was an absolutely horrible thing. Ugly humiliation are the words I have chosen to define it. The one crucified would, in all probability, be completely stripped, laid upon the cross and his hands nailed to the cross piece and feet to the upright piece, though it is certainly possible a that Y-shaped tree would have been used. The cross would then be raised on end and dropped into a hole prepared for it, leaving the sufferer to a lingering and painful death. It was a death which combined the maximum of pain with the least immediate destruction of life. The agony of having nails driven through parts so full of nerves and sinews as the hands and feet, must have been intense. Yet wounds of the hands and feet are not mortal, and do not injure any great leading blood-vessel. One hanging upon a cross might live two or three days, enduring extreme pain, without the relief of death.

A German physician named Richter notes the effect of crucifixion upon the human body. He says, among other things, that, "The unnatural position and violent tension of the body caused a painful sensation from the least motion. The exposure of so many wounds and lacerations brought on inflammation, which tended to become gangrene. In the distended parts of the body more blood flowed through the arteries than could be carried back into the veins, and thus too much blood found its way into the head, causing it to become pressed and swollen. And to all this we way add burning and raging thirst."

That's the ugly humiliation our Lord endured as the satisfaction of justice our sins demanded. And just to make it worse, we read that Jesus had to carry his own cross. It was the Roman custom to compel criminals, sentenced to crucifixion, to carry their own cross. Our Lord was thus treated like the vilest felon, forced to bear his own cross.

How superficially we use that expression today, to bear our cross! We speak of that in reference to some trifling difficulty or struggle, and usually we refer to something over which we have no control. An issue of providence, separate from any choice or decision of our will. A sickness, perhaps. A weakness. Some limitation in our life that we cannot escape. People will often say, "We all have our own cross to bear."

But when Jesus calls us to bear our cross, he refers to something quite different. It's not simply an affliction or painful disease we suffers. Rather, Jesus refers to the willing, sacrificial choice of death. A choice to lay down your life. A commitment to be crucified with him, to die with him. To die to yourself.

Not merely a commitment to give up something or to be restricted from something, but a choice to die. Shall I read Jesus' actual words?

Mat. 16:24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

And,

Mat. 10:37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. 38 "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. 39 "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."

It is worth noting that the physical labor of carrying the cross was so oppressive that Jesus, in his humanity, became unable to continue. There is no contradiction between the gospels, and no error in John's gospel. Jesus bore his own cross as any other criminal, but quickly reached the very limit of his human, physical

strength. Simon carried it the remainder of the way to Golgotha.

Mat. 27:32 “Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross.”

And for the final evidence, in the eyes of his enemies, that Jesus was counted among the common criminals, he was crucified between two of them.

Is. 53:12 “He poured out His soul unto death, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.”

Indeed, even as he hung dying upon the cross, his work on earth was not finished. Even as he endure the torturous pain of crucifixion, he spoke a word of salvation to one of the thieves who hung with him, a man who came to believe in Jesus himself only as he hung next to him, condemned to die!

How glorious is God’s providence, even in the obvious demonstrations of man’s wickedness. And how plain it is to see that as Jesus hung upon that cross, what is really taking place is,

B. The glorious exaltation of a king.

His name as King was even proclaimed to the whole world, as Pilate had three signs erected over Jesus.

v.19

And don’t miss that this true message would be understood by the local Jews who knew and understood Hebrew. It would be understood by the Romans who language was Latin. And it would understood by the whole civilized world, whose language was Greek.

v.20

Clearly, the presence of that sign irritated the Chief Priests,

who demanded its removal.

v.21

But this time, Pilate didn’t give in. Perhaps with intentional offense to those Jewish leaders, he declared,

v.22

Humanly speaking, it may well have been the witness of that sign that the Lord used to bring that thief unto repentance, for he came to understand Jesus’ innocence, declaring his faith to his fellow criminal. We read in,

Luke 23:39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” 40 But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? 41 “And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.” 42 Then he said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”

The crucified King. The one mediator between God and men. Therefore, this is the message I proclaim to you today,

Acts 4:10 “Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. 11 “This is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ 12 “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

And there is more. I would fail to fully explain this passage if I didn’t emphasize that all that is taking place here is the fulfillment of prophecy. Thus, even as he is crucified, Jesus is,

II. THE PROPHESED MESSIAH.

v.23-24

Having put Jesus to death, the soldiers proceeded to do what they probably always did. To divide the clothes of the crucified criminal among themselves. Because the articles of clothing would have different value, they cast lots to see who would get which piece. The presumption is that there were four soldiers, dividing the clothes evenly among themselves. But then there was the tunic, probably the inner garment. To tear it would have served no useful purpose, so they cast lots that one of them might be able to enjoy the whole garment.

This prophesied Messiah was the great high priest, whose garment likewise could not be torn, according to Exodus 28:32. In so many ways, with such complete understanding, we declare that,

A. Jesus died as a great high priest.

A suffering servant, not a guilty offender. And as a high priest,

B. Jesus died forsaken by God as the necessary condemnation our sins deserved.

John makes sure that we realize that this was a precise fulfillment of a prophecy delivered a thousand years before. Little did those four rough Roman soldiers realize that they were actually supplying evidence of the truth of the Scriptures! But they were. They added to the great cloud of witnesses who prove the divine authority of the Bible.

Turn with me to Psalm 22, because I want you to see these words, even as I read them.

Ps. 22:12-18

It's my understanding that Jesus may well have uttered this

whole Psalm upon the cross. At the very least, it was clearly upon his mind, for he did utter those words which begin the Psalm, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning?"

Jesus Christ was forsaken by his father, and for those three hours of darkness upon the cross, from the sixth to the ninth hour, Jesus endured the full measure of the condemning wrath of God his father. That was the full experience of hell, which is the condemning absence of God's presence. The physical pain of human suffering was only the outward evidence. The deeper suffering was in his soul, when he was forsaken by his father. In that condemnation, God his father "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." According to Galatians 3:13, he became a curse for us.

He died, "that the Scripture might be fulfilled." And I emphasize that to you because only in Christ, only through faith in Christ, can your relationship to God be restored. Apart from Christ, you are alienated from God, by nature children of wrath. Apart from Christ, you are guilty, standing under the condemnation and sentence of death which your sins have earned. Only in Christ, can you be freed from that eternal condemnation that you deserve.

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast."

One more glance at Christ this morning, as we marvel at his glorious perfections even as he hung upon the cross. John makes sure that we see Jesus as,

III. THE TENDER SHEPHERD.

And by that, I mean, his tender concern for those whom he

loved. Most especially, his mother. Even as he hung upon the cross, it was his mother about whom he was concerned.

v.25-27

If you put all the words of Jesus in order, as he spoke them from the cross, this was the third of seven. A word of affection. Jesus had been upon the cross for up to three hours, and he sees at least four women close at hand. Along with, apparently, just one of his disciples. John.

These woman were faithful servants. The most probable identification of them is that first woman was Jesus' mother, Mary. The second was his mother's sister, who is probably the same as the woman named Salome in Mark 15, the mother of James and John according to Matthew 27. The third is Mary, the wife of Cleopas, about whom we know very little. And the fourth is Mary Magdalene, a woman noted for her service to Jesus.

And Jesus saw fit to speak to his mother.

v.26 "Woman, behold your son!"

Likewise, to John, who calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved,"

v.27 "Behold your mother!"

What is Jesus doing? I believe the obvious, straightforward explanation makes perfect sense. Jesus is seeing to it that his mother, his earthly mother, is cared for upon his death. That was his human obligation, wasn't it? That was one of the implications of the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother."

The probable presumption is that by this time Joseph, Mary's husband, has died. Jesus, in human terms, is Mary's firstborn son. And we assume she has other children, since Scripture

seems clearly to indicate Jesus had other brothers and sisters in the flesh. Galatians 1:19 refers to James, the Lord's brother. Matthew 13:55-56 mentions four brothers by name, sons of Mary and sons of the carpenter. And sisters are mentioned also.

Therefore, you might think, why doesn't Jesus commend his mother to care of another of her children? And the answer seems to be given in John 7:5, "For even His brothers did not believe in Him."

Jesus was more concerned that his mother be cared for by a believer, than by one of her own children! And who could be expected to take better care of Mary than the disciple whom Jesus loved? John understood, and we are told in verse 27, took her to his own home from that very day!

Do you see how perfectly, how completely, Jesus fulfills the duties of the law? And how good and perfect the law really is? And do you see how careless we are today in the fulfillment of that law? I should note, as an illustration or example, that there is great honor among those of you who have diligently cared for the needs of their own mothers—adult children seeing to the needs of aging and even dying parents.

Jesus never lost sight of that, even as his own death would certainly fulfill the prophecy of Simeon spoken many years earlier to Mary, "a sword will pierce through your own soul also."

A. Jesus never failed in any human obligation.

He never broke a single command, he never failed to do everything that the commandments required! And as he hung upon the cross, dying, that meant tenderly caring for his own dear mother.

And to broaden that just a bit,

B. Jesus never lost his intimate human contact.

He was still the shepherd of his sheep. And the shepherd knows his sheep. He knew who was with him. And who loved him.

He was the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep.

So there you have it. The king upon a cross. The king who laid down his life for the sins of his people. The king, who just one day earlier had celebrated one final passover meal with his disciples, declaring to them as he took the passover bread, broke it and gave it to them,

Luke 22:19 “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” 20 Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you [for the forgiveness of sins.]”

When it comes to the Lord’s Supper, which we will observe this afternoon, we proclaim this faith to be our own.

1 Cor. 11:26 “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.”

The bread which you will eat and the cup which you will drink represent a man of sinless perfection, who cried out to his father in heaven, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning?”

Upon the cross, he would cry out,

Ps. 22:14 “I am poured out like water, And all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; It has melted within Me. 15 My strength is dried up like a potsherd, And My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death. 16 For dogs have

surrounded Me; The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; 17 I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. 18 They divide My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots.”

All of that so that in him, we could be forgiven. And have eternal life.

Isaiah 53:5 “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”