

## Under the Power of Death

John 19:31-42

What is death? Do you have a quick and familiar specific answer to that question? Physicians and nurses could readily give a medical definition, though with advancing medical technologies, there is a growing grey area, medically speaking, in transition between life and death. Is death the absence of brain waves? Is it the absence of a heart beat? Is it the absence of respiration?

In different situations, each of those three might represent death. We speak about people being brain dead! Even if it is just from television, we can all visualize hospital death bed scenes of the heart rate monitor going flat. And we do also speak of people taking their last breath. But none of those describe the essence of death. The essential nature of death is separation, the separation of the body and the soul. Death is, therefore, what the apostle Paul called, being absent from the body. It is your existence as a body-less soul, beginning when your mortal, physical makes its return to the dust. The resurrection is then, of course, the reunion of body and soul.

In our study of John this morning, we come to the death of Jesus. Notice how verse 30 ends,  
v.30

That's death. "He gave up his spirit." His spirit departed from his body, separated from his human flesh. In fact, as we read in Luke 23, his exact final words were, "Father, 'into Your hands I commit My spirit.'" Luke then explains, "Having said this, He breathed His last."

Jesus died. He was a real man, who lived a real life and died

a real death. This isn't a fable. This isn't a myth. This isn't a fanciful story embellished in order to assure its literally popularity. It is truth.

Now, I think all of you understand and believe that, but let me assure you there are plenty of people around who don't. There are plenty of people who read these accounts we've been studying, and consider them as nothing but stories. Maybe even good moral stories, but not real historical events which took place at a certain time at a certain place. I must say that they are wrong, for this is real history. And,

### **I. JESUS ENDURED A REAL HUMAN DEATH.**

That's the point of,  
v.34

There are lots of things that have been written about this verse, some helpful but some unnecessarily and overly symbolic. Let me emphasize what those words mean with absolute certainty. John is giving his readers complete certainty that Jesus died. That his death was a real, true, physiological, biological, flesh and blood human death.

As Ryle notes, "That thrust made it certain, if there had been any doubt before, that the body on the central cross was actually dead." He goes on to say, "To me it seems far more likely that the thrust was the hasty, careless act of a rough soldier, accustomed to prove in this way whether a body was alive or dead."

That was, from John's words, exactly what the soldier was trying to prove. Whether Jesus was alive or dead. Though the soldiers so well experienced in this gruesome form of capital punishment already knew the obvious.

v.33

You see, in a barbaric act of inhumanity added upon the grievous torture of crucifixion, soldiers would use some sort of hammer or iron bar to literally crush or splinter the legs and thereby actually precipitate a death which might otherwise be delayed by several hours or even days. They did that if there was some reason to speed up the death of the condemned man.

But in this case, that wasn't necessary.

v.31-33

But, still, his side was pierced. And out flowed blood and water. Some commentators would say that that was a miraculous event contrary to any possibly normal medical phenomenon, a supernatural event intended by the Lord to teach spiritual lessons.

And that is possible, I can't absolutely deny that idea, though I believe that a natural explanation is more appropriate. Simply put, I believe the spear actually pierced the heart, or the pericardial sac, whose surrounding membranes would have been filled water. When pierced, the combination of water and blood would have been easily observed and naturally explained.

Again the emphasis lies upon the literal nature of this man's physical death. His own heart was pierced, demonstrated the reality of his death. And so we understand from,

1 John 5:6 "This is He who came by water and blood--Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. 7 For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. 8 And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one."

And certainly, without going overboard with the images, there

are many useful symbols in that. Blood is the symbol of atonement, water the symbol of cleansing. Both are essential parts of salvation. There can be at least some allusion even to the symbolism of the two sacraments, the blood of the new covenant in the Communion cup and the water of baptism.

But let me add in all that, I do not mean to say he died of a broken heart, broken by the sorrow of his suffering. Remember, his last words were triumphant! "It is finished." We could loosely paraphrase, "I did it!" And, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

It was not a broken heart, nor a soldier's spear that killed Jesus, for what is obvious in all of this is that,

#### **A. Jesus died under his own power.**

He didn't need to have his legs broken, as would normally have been the case. His life didn't linger because his work was done and he laid down his life of his own accord. Even until the moment he died, he retained the divine power to call upon a legion of angels to rescue him from the horrible circumstances of his ordeal.

But of course, he didn't. He wouldn't. Because he had come into the world in the first place for this very reason. To lay down his own life as the atoning sacrifice to satisfy the wrath and justice of God that our sins had deserved. To obey and submit to his father's will.

So when his work was done, when he declared "It is finished," he bowed his head and HE gave up his spirit into his father's hands. He discharged his own spirit in the very experience of death.

Even in death, especially in death, I should say, Jesus remained in full control of his own life, he retained the power of the eternal godhead. Even in death, he remained the second person of the trinity, the eternal son of God God. He died under his own power.

And so that you and I would be able to know exactly what happened, with truthful certainty,

**B. Jesus died with eyewitness testimony.**  
v.35

Turn to,  
21:24-25

There is a reason for this. It is to convince you that these things are true! And there is a reason why John wants you to believe these things are true. There is a reason why I want you to believe these things are true!

20:30-31

My friends, brothers and sisters in the Lord, let your faith be strengthened in the firm conviction of the truth of Jesus Christ. And for you who doubt, for you who don't believe, who don't rest upon Jesus Christ for your salvation, let me tell you clearly that these words are words of salvation. These words are the words of life. Eternal life.

It is the blood of Jesus Christ that satisfies the wrath and condemning justice of God that you deserve! It is the water, symbolizing the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit, by which your sins are washed away. It is in Jesus, and in him alone, that you find salvation and eternal life.

Act 4:12 "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

The blood was necessary.

Heb. 9:22 "And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission."

And, Heb. 9:27 "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation."

And so I preach to you, "that believing you may have life in His name."

Let's move on in this study of Jesus' death, and focus for a moment upon his body.

**II. JESUS' BODY WAS PUT UNDER THE CARE OF MEN.**  
Two men, in particular, are mentioned.  
v.38-40

This, in many ways, was the final aspect of what we call "Christ's humiliation." Jesus was absent from his body, and although it was a body that would not decay and would be raised on the third day, still he remained under the power of death until the resurrection. And his human body would be subject to the care of men. Ordinary, human, mortal men. The first was,

**A. Joseph of Aramathea, a prominent member of the Sanhedrin.**  
That is the description the gospel writer Mark gives us.

Matthew tells us that he was a rich man, who had become a disciple of Jesus. Luke tells us this in,

Luke 23:50 “Now behold, there was a man named Joseph, a council member, a good and just man. 51 He had not consented to their decision and deed. He was from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who himself was also waiting for the kingdom of God.”

And John explains why we haven't heard anything of him before this time, nothing that though he was a disciple of Jesus, he was “secretly, for fear of the Jews.”

Now the veil of secrecy is removed, and he asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission.

How should we evaluate that about Joseph? J.C. Ryle gives such a balanced and objective description that it is well worth your hearing, “We are distinctly told in John 12:42, that ‘many of the chief rulers believed, but did not confess Christ, because of the Pharisees.’ But the character given of them, that ‘they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God,’ is so condemnatory, that we may well doubt whether Joseph was one of these. Lack of physical or moral courage was probably the flaw in his character. It is only fair to remember that, as ‘a rich man and a counselor,’ he had far more to sacrifice, and far more opposition to encounter, than poor fishermen or publicans would have. his backwardness to confess Christ cannot, of course, be defended. But his case teaches us that there is sometimes more spiritual work going on in men's minds than appears. We must not set down every one as utterly graceless and godless, who is not bold and outspoken at present. We must charitably hope that there are some secret disciples, who at present hold their tongue and say nothing, and yet, like Joseph, will one day come forward,

and be courageous witnesses for Christ. All is not gold that glitters, and all is not dross that look dirty and makes no show. We must be charitable and hope on. His case should also teach us the great power of that mischievous principle, the fear of man. Open sin kills it thousands, but the fear of man its tens of thousands. Let us watch and pray against it. Faith is the grand secret of victory over it.”

And about Joseph's actions here, Ryle goes on to say, “The conduct of Joseph deserves our praise and admiration, and his name will be held in honor by the Church of Christ, in consequence of it, as long as the world stands. Whatever Joseph was at first, he shone brightly at last.”

Indeed, it was Joseph, not one of the eleven who came forward when Jesus was but a lifeless corpse to the human eye, when by all appearance there was nothing to be gained humanly speaking. He came forward to honor a man condemned as a criminal and who had been sentenced to the cursed death upon the cross. At this point, he went in to Pilate boldly, and did indeed risk that prominence and wealth which he enjoyed among the Jews. He would now be a marked man, whose reputation and character with Caiaphas and the high priests was utterly ruined.

But, of course, there would be great eternal reward. For finally, he was free of that terrible oppression of the fear of man. Finally he was free from that unbearable burden of living to please men. And he became a God-pleaser. In his own repentance and confession, he would surely understand what Paul would come to write to the Galatian church,

Gal. 1:10 “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.”

And so the corpse of Jesus, his soul-less body, which remained under the power of that separation of death, was well-cared for.

v.41-42

The other man was,

**B. Nicodemus, a ruler of the Pharisees.**

v.39-40

Obviously, that great encounter earlier between Jesus and Nicodemus had borne great fruit. It was to Nicodemus that Jesus had said,

John 3:5 “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit...14 “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 “that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

By God’s grace, by the miraculous power the Holy Spirit at work in a man’s heart and will, Nicodemus had become a believer. And with a similar evaluation as that of Joseph, Ryle writes, “He showed more reverence and love to our Lord when dead, than he had ever done when alive. Once more we see that circumstances bring out character in very unexpected ways.”

And so it was the death of Christ that would bring out the life in these two men. And with these two men, we see how small and

weak the beginning of true religion may be in the soul of man. Thus we must have patience and charity in forming judgments estimating the faith of others. In Ryle’s words, “the strongest, hardiest trees, are often the slowest in growth.”

My own pastoral experience bears that out, and I have witnessed many times not a small disruption and disturbance in the peace and unity of the church when quick judgments are made about another’s faith, based upon merely external observations. In more than one instance, I was the recipient of such an unfairly negative judgment, and I know the pain such a thing causes.

Jesus himself would fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 42, which declares, “A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth.”

He will not break a bruised reed, for he is a gentle shepherd whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. For that reason, let me discourage you from making quick judgments about other professing Christians, whether or not they are saved. That judgment is rightly left to the exercise of discipline by the elders of the church. If there is sin, the person needs to repent, and you, individually, have the right and responsibility to confront one another about issues of sin. That ought to take place before the church ever becomes involved in any sort of formal manner. But when you confront a professed believer about a particular sin, or even if you form judgments about him, be very careful and cautious about making a judgment about whether or not he is a Christian. He might be like Nicodemus or Joseph, before the death of Christ!

Jesus’ body was put under the care of two men who deserve a very favorable judgment for their admittedly belated acts of

kindness and devotion, and I do believe that we will do well to pass judgment upon those men in the best possible light, and to seek to follow that pattern in judgments of one another. For remember the great warning of Scripture,

Mat. 7:2 “For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.”

Back to Jesus’ death, one final observation so obvious, and so edifying for me to emphasize with you.

### **III. JESUS DIED IN FULFILLMENT OF MANY PROPHECIES.**

This was God’s plan! And he had predicted so many of the very specific details. We saw many of them a few weeks ago, in comparing Psalm 22 with Jesus’ experiences upon the cross. Especially,

Ps. 22:13 “They gape at Me with their mouths, Like a raging and roaring lion. 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.”

We have also focused on Isaiah 53, such prophecies as these: “And by His stripes we are healed.” And, “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.” Also, “And they made His grave with the wicked-- But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth.”

Today, there are two other prophecies to be specifically fulfilled. First,

#### **A. Jesus’ bones remained unbroken.**

v.36

Go back to,

Ps. 34:19 “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all. 20 He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken.”

Also, you should realize that the OT regulations for the passover lamb also require that no bones be broken, and Jesus himself became that passover lamb!

Ex. 12:46 “In one house it shall be eaten; you shall not carry any of the flesh outside the house, nor shall you break one of its bones.”

Let me again quote from J. C. Ryle, who has so many good things to say about this passage, “Nothing in the great sacrifice happened by chance, luck, or accident. All was arranged as appointed from first to last, many centuries before, by the determinate counsel of God. Caiaphas, Pilate, the Roman soldiers, were all unconscious instruments in carrying into effect what God had long predicted and foretold to the least jot and tittle.”

The second prophecy, adding to our own confidence in the truthfulness of John’s account and in the sovereign purposes of God,

#### **B. Jesus’ body was pierced.**

I’ve already made reference to that, from,

v.34

And, v.37

So that you hear the original words, listen to,

Zech. 12:10 “And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.”

Note in Zechariah’s prophecy, that those who look, those who look upon the one pierced, does not refer to the soldiers who had put him to death. It refers to the repentant, who would look upon him unto salvation. Indeed, as Zechariah’s own prophecy continued,

Zech. 13:7 “Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, Against the Man who is My Companion,” Says the LORD of hosts. “Strike the Shepherd, And the sheep will be scattered; Then I will turn My hand against the little ones. 8 And it shall come to pass in all the land,” Says the LORD, “That two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, But one-third shall be left in it: 9 I will bring the one-third through the fire, Will refine them as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, And I will answer them. I will say, ‘This is My people’; And each one will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’”

Even as he hung dying upon the cross, that prophecy was fulfilled, as the thief hanging to one side of him called out to him and found eternal life just moments before he would die.

So it is today, that we look upon the one whom they pierced, we look upon Jesus in our study of this gospel of John. And as you look upon him, understand that this was the son of God who suffered and died as the atoning sacrifice for your sins. And,

John 20:31 “...these [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”