

LESSONS OF THE CROSS **(John 19:17-37 July 10, 2005)**

Turn with me if you will to John 19:16 and read with me the account of the death of Jesus.

So Pilate then handed Jesus over to the soldiers to be crucified.

The soldiers took Jesus, and lashed Him until He was weak from the beatings and loss of blood. They poured their anger and hatred upon Him in a savage beating.

When He could endure no more – they forced Him to take up the crossbeam of His cross and begin the agonising walk to the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha.

Each step sent shivers of agony through Him. But Jesus resolutely set His face to the cross where He must go.

He could end this torment at any moment with a word – but for the sake of the world He endured the agonies of death to the end.

At Golgotha, they crucified Him. Nails were hammered into His arms and legs. He was jerked upright – and the agony only increased.

The pain was excruciating. The sun beat down. He could barely breathe. And hour by excruciating hour Jesus suffered the pain of death by crucifixion as His death paid the sins of the world.

Finally, the hour had come and Jesus looked to the heavens and cried, “It is finished,” and He breathed His last.

I am sure that you noticed that this is *not* the account of the crucifixion of Jesus in John. But this week I asked myself – *why* isn't that the way John describes the death of Jesus? That is how I would have written Jesus' death.

Isn't the crucifixion all about the suffering of Jesus as He bears our sin? He suffers in our place. His suffering is so great because my sin is so great.

Most of our crucifixion hymns bear this message. Most of our Easter sermons bear this message.

And yet, in his account of the crucifixion, John barely mentions the suffering and pain of Jesus. He does not focus on Jesus dying in our place. Instead he focuses on what seem to me to be minor, peripheral details. He tells us that:

- Jesus was crucified between two criminals.
- The soldiers divided up His clothes among themselves.

- Jesus placed His mother under the care of John.
- Jesus was given a mouthful of sour wine.
- Jesus' legs were not broken.
- Jesus' side was pierced with a spear.

Why does John's account of the death of Jesus focus on these seemingly minor events? Why didn't he focus more on the suffering and pain of Jesus while He died for us?

This morning I want to try and answer this.

As you read through John's Gospel – you find that the cross dominates the entire book. Everything leads up to this point.

And yes – teaching about the substitutionary atonement – Jesus the innocent dying that we the guilty might live – is implied in John.

But that isn't the main focus of the cross in this gospel.

The focus in John is that *the cross has always been the plan of God – the pre-eminent way in which Jesus glorifies God by dying to save lost men.*

So it is not surprising that John's account of the death of Jesus focuses on this *one* great truth.

The death of Jesus was the plan of God for glorifying the Son and redeeming mankind.

The cross is *never* seen as a tragic accident. It is seen as the triumph of the divine plan.

God planned every aspect. Jesus followed the plan. And together – *they* receive the glory.

And as He comes to the actual account of the cross – John shows this by focusing on *five* lessons of the cross.

- The *first* lesson of the cross – is that a humiliating, cursed death – was the plan by which Jesus would become the Saviour of the world.
- The *second* lesson of the cross – is that Jesus' death and resurrection – was the plan by which He would be displayed as the true King of Israel.
- The *third* lesson of the cross – is that every aspect of Jesus' death was in the will of God.

- The *fourth* lesson of the cross – is that Jesus' death was intended to change forever the most fundamental relationships we have.
- The *fifth* lesson of the cross – is that Jesus had to die as One who was fully man – to become the Saviour of men.

To see how this fleshes out – turn with me to John 19.

- The *first* lesson of the cross – is that a humiliating, cursed death – was the plan by which Jesus would become the Saviour of the world.

Look at verses 17-18:

They 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.

Crucifixion was the most humiliating form of death in the Roman Empire.

Everything about this death was designed to humiliate the victim and be a warning to others.

The victim was forced to walk to the place of execution – publicly carrying the cross-member on which He would be crucified. His crimes were written on a placard – a *titulus* – carried around His neck and later displayed on the cross for all to see.

At the place of crucifixion he was stripped naked and humiliated. He was nailed to the cross.

To make sure that he didn't die too quickly crosses had what was called a *sedecula* – a little seat that you could push up on to breathe and thus live longer.

The place of execution was near a thoroughfare – so every passer-by could watch as the condemned died.

Cicero called crucifixion – that most cruel and disgusting penalty.

Josephus described it as – the most wretched of deaths.

It was so painful that the Roman philosopher Seneca said that *nothing* would induce someone to choose this as the method of their execution. Often it took days of incredible agony for the condemned to actually die.

Crucifixion was so humiliating and gruesome that it was reserved for slaves, lower classes and Barbarians.

The Jews would never have thought of crucifying someone. The Jews opposed stripping someone naked for death. They saw hanging someone on a cross or a tree as a sign of cursing.

The Jews chose to stone someone to death – a relatively fast death.

To them to die by crucifixion was so shameful that it was to die under a curse. That is why Galatians 3:13 says:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, **having become a curse for us**—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”

But in order to redeem us from the curse – this is the very form of death Jesus **had** to die. He **had** to die the most humiliating, accursed death to bear *our* shame and *our* curse.

And as if to magnify the sense of shame – Jesus was crucified between two common criminals.

Throughout John, Jesus has said that He must go to the cross – He must be lifted up – He must lay down His life in this way – in order to become the Saviour of the world.

And crucifixion was the death necessary if Jesus was to bear our shame, our curse, our sin.

- The *second* lesson of the cross – is that Jesus’ death and resurrection – was the plan by which He would be displayed as the true King of Israel.

Verses 19-22:

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

When a man was condemned to die by crucifixion – his crime was written on a placard – a *titulus* – and hung around his neck as he made his way to the place of execution.

Once he was crucified – this placard was nailed to the cross so all could see the crime for which he suffered this horrendous punishment.

In Palestine – the charge was written in three languages – Hebrew – or more precisely Aramaic – the language of the people of Judea – Latin – the language of the army – and Greek – the *lingua franca* of the Empire.

Everyone would know why this criminal was crucified.

In the case of Jesus – what was the crime for which He suffered so? As we saw last week – the crime for which the Sanhedrin brought Jesus to Pilate was for claiming to be the King of the Jews.

So Pilate had this charge affixed to the cross.

The leaders of the Jews were offended by this. They wanted the sign to read – “I am the King of the Jews” – they wanted it to seem that Jesus only *claimed* to be the King of the Jews – not that He *actually* was the King of the Jews.

But Pilate had a little revenge on the Jews – What I have written, I have written. You wanted Him condemned to death on this charge – fine – live with it.

On one level there is irony – Jesus **is** the Son of God – the King of Israel. The Jews refuse to accept the truth – but use the claim to kill Him.

But there is more going on here.

The writers of the New Testament view the death and resurrection of Jesus as **proof** that He was the Son of God – the true King of Israel.

The very fact He was killed on the cross proves that He is the King of Israel.

They look to the Old Testament and declare that the Scriptures said that when Messiah came, the proof that He was who He claimed to be would be that He would be killed and then rise again.

In other words – the way the Scriptures tell us the true Messiah – the Son of God – the true King of Israel could be identified is that He would die and be raised as a declaration to all that this is the Messiah.

This meant that just as the *titulus* proclaimed – Jesus *is* indeed the Son of God – the King.

We find this argument prominent in the book of Hebrews. We find that Paul uses it in a number of places. Just listen to Romans 1:4:

[Jesus] was declared the Son of God with power *by the resurrection from the dead*, according to the Spirit of holiness.

But perhaps the clearest place we find this argument is in Acts 13:16-39. Paul is in a synagogue at Pisidian Antioch on the Sabbath day. He is arguing the case that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah the Jews anticipated.

He is arguing with biblically literate Jews that Jesus is indeed the expected greater Son of David – the true King of the Jews.

And Paul argues that He is declared to be the Messiah – the King – by His death and resurrection – as prophesied in the Old Testament.

Look at what Paul says. Acts 13:16:

Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen.”

Then in verses 17-22 – Paul describes the history of Israel up to the inauguration of the Davidic dynasty.

Verse 23:

From the descendants of this man [David], according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus.

The Scriptures promised a Great coming King who would be descended from David. And Paul maintains that this can only be Jesus.

How does He prove that Jesus is this promised Saviour? How does He show that Jesus is the long awaited descendant of David – the true King? By pointing to His death and resurrection.

Look at verse 27 and following:

For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognising neither Him *nor the utterances of the prophets* which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. When they had carried out *all that was written concerning Him*, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb.

Jesus died. He was executed and laid in a tomb as the prophets foretold.

But what was written still had *more* to be fulfilled. After His death, God exalted Him by raising Him from the dead and in so doing declared to the world that Jesus is the true King. Look at this:

But God raised Him from the dead; and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people.

Jesus died and was laid in the tomb. But Jesus also rose again – many eyewitnesses attest to this fact. *And because of this:*

We preach to you the good news of the promise *made to the fathers*, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children *in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'You are My Son; today I have begotten You.'*

Do you follow this argument? *Because* Jesus was raised from the dead – it shows that He **is** the Davidic King promised in Psalm 2 – promised to the fathers – the coming descendant of David – the One who is the Son of God.

Paul continues:

As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.'

Therefore He also says in another Psalm, 'You will not allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.' For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.

God promised that One would come who would inherit the holy and sure blessings of David and also that this Holy One would **not** undergo decay.

Since David died and underwent decay – this coming One must be *greater* than David.

And how do you avoid undergoing decay? You can avoid it only if you are raised from the dead.

To Paul and to everyone who understands the Old Testament – the point is that the promised Holy One is declared as the true Davidic King *through* His **death and resurrection**.

In Acts 2 – Peter uses the very same texts to show that the death and resurrection of Jesus show Him to be the true King.

After making this point, Peter ends with Acts 2:36:

Therefore let all the house of Israel know for **certain** that God has made Him – the One who died and was raised – both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.

In the very act of dying – Jesus is shown to be the true King of Israel. The Saviour, the Messiah, the Redeemer – had to die – not only to save us – but to be declared before the eyes of the world as the *King of Israel*.

I know this might be a complex argument for Sunday morning – let me see if I can put it in simple terms.

In the prophets – in the Psalms – in the Law – God said – I will send the Saviour – the Messiah – the true King.

How will you know that He is the true King? He will be killed by the very ones He came to save – but then I will raise Him from the dead.

So when someone comes – and does the signs of Messiah – and lives like Messiah – when you see Him being put to death – watch carefully. When I raise Him from the dead – you will know that you have killed your King.

The very fact Jesus died under a sign saying – The King of the Jews – should have sent alarm bells ringing. He *is* the Saviour. He *is* the true King.

It was always the plan of God for Jesus – the King – to die for the world on the cross.

- The *third* lesson of the cross – is that *every* aspect of Jesus' death was in the will of God.

Verses 23-24:

Then the soldiers, 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. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be"; this was to fulfil the Scripture: "They divided My outer garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots."

When a criminal was crucified – it was one of the perks for the soldiers who carried out the execution to take the clothes of the condemned man.

Typical attire for the first century included a tunic which was worn next to the skin and then the outer garments – robe, head-covering, belt and sandals.

So in all – there were five pieces of clothing.

While certainly not expensive, the most valuable item was the tunic. Jewish tunics were often seamless and made from one piece of material because – Leviticus 19:19 stated that you could not sew two different materials together – and making it all out of one piece meant you couldn't violate this law.

But this meant you couldn't divide it up.

So it appears that what the four soldiers did was this – they divided up the four least expensive items – robe, head-covering, belt and sandals – possibly gambling to see who got what.

And for the tunic – they gambled – casting lots – winner take all.

In itself, this would be entirely unremarkable – *except* a thousand years earlier – David wrote a Psalm – Psalm 22.

That Psalm spoke of David's suffering – but it also spoke prophetically of the suffering of David's greater Son – the Messiah.

Much of this Psalm speaks prophetically of the suffering of Jesus on the cross.

It begins with the cry:

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?

It also contains these sections:

Psalm 22:7-8:

All who see me sneer at me;
They separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying,
Commit yourself to the Lord; let Him deliver him;
Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him.

And Psalm 22:15-16:

My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
And my tongue cleaves to my jaws;
And You lay me in the dust of death.
For dogs have surrounded me;
A band of evildoers has encompassed me;
They pierced my hands and my feet.

And most relevant for us – Psalm 22:18:

They divide my garments among them,
And for my clothing they cast lots.

The point is that a thousand years earlier – God had foretold the crucifixion – at a time when there was no Roman Empire and there was no crucifixion.

And He described it in detail in many of the Psalms and Prophets – so detailed that even the mundane fact that a thousand years later, the soldiers who crucified the Messiah would divide His garments up and cast lots for them was foretold.

The crucifixion in all its gory horror – every detail great and small – was not something that took God by surprise – it was the plan of God from eternity past.

To save us – God Himself, the Messiah, the King of Israel – had to die this humiliating, horrific death.

But the love of God for us – meant from eternity past – God intended to save us by dying on that cross.

- The *fourth* lesson of the cross – is that Jesus' death was intended to change forever the most fundamental relationships we have. vv. 25-27.

Therefore the soldiers did these things. But standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus then 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!" From that hour the disciple took her into his own household.

John moves on to mention some women standing near the cross.

While the structure of this sentence could mean there are 2, 3 or 4 women mentioned – almost certainly there are four. Four women of faith – compared to the four soldiers who crucified Christ.

One is Mary, Jesus' mother.

Another is Mary's sister. When we compare the accounts in Mark and Matthew – most likely her name is Salome and she was the mother of James and John.

This would mean that Salome was Jesus' aunt and that James and John were His cousins.

The third woman is Mary the wife of Klopas – the mother of James the less and Joses. We know very little about this woman.

The final woman is Mary Magdalene – a woman who Jesus cast seven demons out of and who was one of the women who ministered to Jesus.

But the narrative moves on to focus on Mary – Jesus' mother – and the disciple whom Jesus loved – almost certainly John.

Jesus is dying. Joseph, His earthly father is dead. Jesus says to His mother – Woman – or better – madam – behold your son – and to John – Behold your mother.

What is remarkable about this is that Jesus has brothers – James, Jude and others. *They* should take on the care of Mary.

But if you think back to John 2 – the miracle where Jesus turned the water into wine. Jesus had a point to make.

Addressing Mary He makes it clear that she needed to understand that the relationship between them had changed. There Jesus said to her:

“My hour has not yet come.”

Jesus was beginning His ministry – and it would last until the cross.

By referring to *His hour* – He is making a statement that His ministry has begun. And as such all relationships to Him must change – ***even that of His mother.***

Jesus made it clear in no uncertain terms that even Mary has to come to grips with just who it was before her.

His ministry had started. He was now exclusively doing the will of His heavenly Father.

Mary can no longer treat Him just as a son – but must understand He is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Saviour and eventually she must grasp that He is God Himself.

It took some time – but finally Mary did come to fully grasp who Jesus is. She is a believer. And she was there at the greatest moments in history – the birth and death of the Saviour.

But Mary is like every other believer – her faith makes her a part of the body of Christ.

When Jesus has gone – her prime relationships will be with other believers – men and women of faith.

The world of faith supersedes the world of flesh and blood.

So her care is not entrusted to her unbelieving sons – but to her believing nephew – John. And from that moment on Mary became a part of John’s household.

What is the point?

We are born into families. And praise God – often we are born into believing families. But for many our families are not believers. And while we still love and respect them – our closest relationships become those who are of the family of faith.

This is what happened to Jesus. In Mark 3:31-35 Jesus made this clear:

Then [Jesus’] mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him. A crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, “Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You.” Answering them, He said, “Who are My mother and My brothers?” Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, “Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother.”

Believers become the family of Christ – and as such we become the family of each other.

The cross alters the most fundamental relationships we have.

This week I received an email from a Nigerian girl who found us on the web.

I have never met her. She might be from a different race and raised in a different country – but in Christ we are one.

Galatians 3:28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

What Jesus did in entrusting the care of His mother to a believer instead of an unbelieving brother was an example to us all.

We are family. We are one in Christ. Behold your closest relatives on the face of the earth – now and eternally.

The cross redeemed us – united us with Christ – made us one. The cross joined us forever. The cross links us for all eternity. It was the plan of God to change forever our most fundamental relationships. Now the crucial fact about us is that we belong to Christ.

- The *fifth* lesson of the cross – is that Jesus had to die as One who was fully man – to become the Saviour of men. vv. 28-37.

If there is one overarching truth that echoes through the pages of John – it is this – **Jesus is God!**

It culminates in the great confession of Thomas – my Lord and my God!

But, John is also mindful that we never forget that the Word became *flesh*.

The One who died had to be *fully* man. To stand in the place of Adam's race – He had to be a part of that race – He had to be a man.

The One who hung on that cross was fully God *and* fully man. In these next verses – John shows us that Jesus died as a man – and he shows that the Scriptures foretold that the Messiah would die as a man.

Look at how this fleshes out.

Verses 28-29:

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, to fulfil the Scripture, 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.

Jesus knew that the reason He had come – to die on that cross was about to be accomplished.

But the Scriptures indicated His death would be the painful, horrific death of a man.

He died in agonising thirst – as Psalm 22 prophesied.

He was a man – beaten, suffering blood loss, dehydrated – in the sun.

He was given a taste of the cheap sour wine of the day.

Verse 30:

Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

Jesus knew He had accomplished the task for which He came. He came to glorify God. He had accomplished that task in His life and death.

Men could be redeemed. Men could know God. Men could be saved from sin.

So Jesus gave us His life.

In John 10 we read that no one could take Jesus' life – instead He would lay it down. And that is what He does.

Verses 31-34:

Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would 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. So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other 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 blood and water came out.

The usual Roman practice was for criminals to hang on the cross until they were dead – and this often took many days.

This caused a problem for the Jews around the Sabbath. And as John told us – it was the day of preparation – the day before the Sabbath. And this was a special Sabbath – a high day – because it was a Sabbath during the feast of Passover.

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 said:

If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance.

If Jesus or the two criminals died *after* sunset – the Jews were not permitted to take the bodies down on a Sabbath. But to leave them there violated this law in Deuteronomy.

So they wanted them off the cross and in the tomb before sunset – before the Sabbath started.

Josephus tells us that the Romans made allowances for the Jews and killed any men on the cross who were still alive as the Sabbath approached.

The Romans had a method of finishing off the death of those being crucified. They would take a large mallet and break their legs. Not only would this cause huge blood loss – but they couldn't push up to breathe. They would soon suffocate.

When the Romans came to the two thieves – they were still alive. Their legs were crushed and they soon died.

But Jesus was already dead. So instead of breaking His legs – the soldier made sure Jesus was dead by plunging a spear into His side. Blood and water flowed out.

Most likely what is going on is this. In the beating Jesus suffered – He began to bleed into His chest cavity – maybe up to two litres.

Blood separates into the red cells and the plasma. A spear penetrating this cavity would let out the blood cells and then the plasma – blood and water.

But the point is that Jesus was dead – beyond any shadow of doubt – dead.

Not only do Roman soldiers know how to tell if a man is dead – the flow of blood and water showed that Jesus had most certainly died – as a man.

He did not swoon and later recover – He was dead. He died for the sins of the world.

And John wants us to know that. Verse 33:

And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe.

John saw Him die – there is no doubt Jesus was dead.

And there is no doubt that Jesus' death as a *man* was the plan of God. It was recorded in Scripture that He would die in this way. The fact that the soldiers would not break His legs and would pierce Him was found in Scripture. Verses 36 and 37:

For these things came to pass to fulfil the Scripture, "Not a bone of Him shall be broken." And again another Scripture says, "They shall look on Him whom they pierced."

These verses recount the death of Jesus. And in different ways, with different emphases – they all focus on one great truth. **The death of Jesus was always the plan of God for redeeming mankind.**

There was no other way to save you. God orchestrated this death – in every detail – because nothing else could save us from our sins.

But there is a lesson here for us. Remember the words Jesus spoke the night before His death.

John 13:34-35:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

And the words of Peter. 1 Peter 2:21-24:

You have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps ... He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

And Revelation 5 says that Jesus died that we might glorify God forever.

The cross – in every gory gruesome detail was the plan of God. He died to make us holy. He died to make us evangelists. He died to make us family. He died so that we might glorify Him now and forever.

The plan of God was to redeem us and transform us into a new race. It cost the death of His Son. But it is no tragedy. Instead it turns tragedy into victory.

In this is the true glory of the cross.