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Dead and Buried

John 19:31-42

Intro: As we've studied through [ch18-19](#) we've noted on several occasions an awkward irony present in the arrest, trials and execution of Jesus Christ. At every turn the religious leaders were adamant about observing the most minute requirements of the Mosaic law all the while callously disregarding the intent of that same law by hounding an innocent Jesus to His death. They sought to formally open 2 separate trials to seek an official condemnation but then broke scores of legal safeguards and even denied the accused any kind of defense. They refused to enter Pilate's judgment hall so as to not be defiled and become unfit to eat the Passover but showed absolutely no qualms about defiling themselves with the innocent blood of Jesus Christ, the true Passover Lamb.

Charles Spurgeon said that "Religious scruples may live in a dead conscience" and the truth is, they can live there quite happily for a long time. I only mention this here because we will see this same hypocritical principle operating in the events recorded in today's text, from the moments immediately following the death of Jesus.

31-37 – John is the only Gospel writer that records this incident and its presence is an indication that the death of Jesus took place fairly quickly, sooner even than the other 2 men who were crucified with Him. The text reads as an eyewitness account and John recorded it for us because it impressed clearly him so much. But why? Many scholars have attempted to discover or even insert some edifying meaning into what John describes here but the only thing a serious student of Scripture needs to ask is, "why was John so impressed by what he saw on that glorious day?"

It was Roman custom to leave the body of the crucified upon the cross to rot as a warning to others. But in Israel, most things were governed by Mosaic Law rather than Roman law and victims were expected to be buried. The Law specified that if a man was executed and hung on a tree, he must be buried the same day (Deut 21:22-23). Plus, executions weren't to occur on a religious feast day, like the Passover. Out of respect for these laws, the religious leaders went to Pilate and requested that the victim's legs be

broken to facilitate their deaths. With broken legs, the victim could no longer hoist himself up to relieve the pressure on his diaphragm and he would quickly suffocate.

Pilate did not care about the bodies, so he granted their request. Soldiers were sent to break the legs of the three victims. The thieves legs were broken, but when they came to Jesus they saw that He was already dead so they didn't break His legs. Instead, one of them stuck a spear into His side, for good measure. This thrust caused blood and water to pour out. John records these facts and tells us that they happened in fulfillment of Scripture. He draws special attention to the issue of blood and water, saying, "he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe" (35).

Who is the witness? It would seem pretty clear to the casual observer but there a few conflicting theories that we will not entertain today because they stem from an incredible notion that says John was not the author of the Gospel that bears his name. If you don't have that problem then it's pretty clear that John is referring to himself as being the eye-witness to these extraordinary events. He's already been presented to us as a historical figure who was present at the cross and so has every reason to identify himself as the trustworthy witness to these facts. The solemn tone of the verse may be due to the fact that at the time he wrote this, John was the only eye-witness left who could testify.

But, why does John give so much attention to this particular incident? Jesus' death, the central point of the whole Gospel is only given half a verse (30b), without any editorial comment from John. But now, what seems like a minor matter – Jesus' legs not broken and His side pierced – are given disproportionate attention. Obviously, John's emphasis of these events is for a good reason even if we don't know what it is at first glance. What we do know is that it will benefit us greatly to closely examine these verses and diligently search out the true meaning.

There are several interpretations that have been offered to explain John's emphasis on the blood and water that may sound clever but are actually hard to accept. The 1st interpretation posits that the blood and water that flowed from Jesus' side signify the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. But, John doesn't use these words in that way so this theory is not

supported by the text. This view is held by those who try to add saving value to the sacraments.

The 2nd interpretation sees this incident as mystical, or allegorical. It says that, just as Eve issued from the side of Adam, so the church issues from the side of Christ, the second Adam. This view is quite a stretch and though the idea might make for a clever sermon or devotion, this is clearly not what John meant when he recorded it.

A 3rd view has been popular among evangelical groups for some time and was presented over a century ago by a medical doctor in England named William Stroud. He wrote a book that claimed that Jesus' death was due to a ruptured or broken heart. He stated that this condition could be caused by great mental anguish where the walls of the heart would tear open and the blood would then enter the pericardium (the sack surrounding the heart that's filled with a watery substance). The problem with this view is not the validity of the medical explanation of what came from the wound, though some doctors have questioned Stroud's theory. The problem is his suggestion that Jesus died from a broken heart. From our own study of the crucifixion we know that that's not how Jesus died at all! He died triumphantly, giving up His spirit. If, after surrendering His spirit, His heart gave way is a medical possibility but the fact would have been unknown to John so this could not possibly be the reason he recorded these events.

So why did John record these events? It could be for any or all of the following reasons.

1) This entire scene, the failure of the soldiers to break Jesus' legs and the piercing of His side, testified beyond any doubt that Jesus really died. Breaking the legs facilitated death. The only reason Jesus' legs weren't broken: He was already dead. But just to be sure, a spear was thrust into His side, all carefully recorded by the eye-witness. This all was important in view of the later claims about the resurrection. Jesus hadn't just swooned on the cross only to revive later in the cool of the tomb and then emerge to appear to His disciples as if He had been raised from the dead. He really died and He was really resurrected. This was 1 reason why the details were important. But they were also important for another reason. By the time John wrote his Gospel, heretical Gnostic teachings had already begun to infiltrate the church. The Gnostics denied that Jesus was a real man and

possessed a real body. This event proves the Gnostics wrong and shows that Jesus actually tasted death physically as a man for us. The Gospel is the story of both a real death for sin and a real resurrection.

2) John records these events as the fulfillment of Scripture. This is clearly his emphasis. It was an incredible fulfillment of Scripture too, because it was both complicated and improbable. There were 2 prophecies involved: **Ps 34:20** and **Zech 12:10**. One was negative; the other was positive. The one said that the Savior's bones must not be broken; the other said that the Savior must be pierced. Amazingly, it was the exact opposite of these 2 prophecies that the soldiers were ordered to do. They had orders to break Jesus' legs along with the legs of the two thieves, and they had no intention at all of piercing Him with the spear. Yet they ended up fulfilling the prophecies. How can brutal men be kept from one act of violence, for which they had direct orders, and be moved to perform another act for which they had no orders? Only by overruling circumstances, the God who inspired the prophecies made sure that they were fulfilled.

If God did this for these prophecies, will He not do so the same with all the prophecies in His Word, including those that involve us? If you doubt God loves you enough to save you, **Rom 5:8** says otherwise. If you think sanctification is an impossible dream, **Phil 1:6** says different. If you are afraid to give to the Lord's work because it might break you, **Phil 4:19** disagrees. Let's trust God's Word. If you come across an unlikely promise in the Bible, believe it firmly. When you see things in your life working contrary to the word of God, believe God, and nothing else. Hold on to what God has said; for heaven and earth shall pass away, but not one jot or tittle of His word shall fall to the ground.

3) His bones not being broken points to Jesus as the Passover Lamb slain for the sins of the world. John refers to **Ps 34:20** this psalm doesn't necessarily apply to the Messiah. John refers to this psalm, but he's thinking of something greater. He knows that one of the requirements of Passover says that not a bone of the Passover lamb should be broken. These 2 seemingly pointless details come together in God's providence to identify Jesus as the Passover Lamb through whom we have spiritual deliverance.

Every Jew knew the significance of the Passover. This was the event where God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. God had warned that on this

night He would bring the last of 10 great judgments upon Egypt, a judgment that would take the firstborn of every household. God would send his angel to slay the firstborn throughout the entire land. The only homes to be spared were those that followed His instructions. They were to take a lamb, without blemish or spot, and kill it. Then they were to take the blood of that lamb and sprinkle it on the doorposts and lintel of the house. When the angel of death came, if he saw the blood he would “pass over” that house and spare it. This was the great national event and festival that the Jews were beginning to remember the day Jesus was killed.

What John is saying (by divine inspiration) is that Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of that important OT picture. We are sinners. We deserve to die. The angel of God’s judgment is coming. But Jesus has died in our place. His blood has purged our sin; now, because of His death, the angel of God’s judgment will pass by all who trust in Him.

4) This incident fulfills the prophecy in [Zech 12:10](#). Of course, that verse mainly deals with the 2nd Coming of Christ. But the full meaning of what John is saying can be found just five verses farther down in the passage, [Zech 13:1](#), Certainly, John knew this verse. Plus, he knew from the OT how important “blood” was for cleansing from sin ([Lev 17:11](#)) and how important “water” was for purification from uncleanness. So, when John saw both these elements issue from the pierced side of Jesus and recalled this prophecy, he recognized it as teaching that all deliverance and cleansing from sin and its defilement are to be found in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross..

John wasn’t the only person to make this same connection. The English poet, William Cowper, wrote a great hymn in commemoration of this event entitled, “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood.”

There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Emmanuel’s veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that
flood
Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there may I, as vile as he,
Wash all my sins away

Like John and William Cowper, countless multitudes since have seen these truths and rejoiced in knowing that is it through Christ’s death alone that we have salvation.

38-42 – John introduces us to 2 more characters: 1 is familiar (Nicodemus), the other is new (Joseph). All 4 Gospel mention Joseph but Nicodemus only appears in John. All that we know about these men is that they were rich and prominent. Both were members of the Sanhedrin. They believed in Jesus, at least to some degree; though whether or not they were born again is impossible to tell. Nicodemus had referred to Jesus as a teacher from God when he first met with Him in **ch3** but the fear that prevented him from coming to Jesus openly then also prevented him from being with Jesus during His earthly ministry and kept him silent when Jesus was being unjustly condemned and crucified. Joseph is called a disciple and a good and upright man who didn't consent to the decision to condemn Jesus. But his protests must have been silent ones. It's impossible to determine if their commitment to Jesus extends past their efforts as funeral directors for Him. Neither is mentioned again in Scripture or in other early Christian documents.

It's true, at least they were in Jerusalem caring for Jesus' body when His more visible and vocal disciples had fled. But that fact says more about the failure of the 12 than it does about the discipleship of Joe and Nick. Many a church has been built, or stained-glass window installed or pew purchased by those who simply have a guilty conscience. Their actions are no more proof of possessing eternal life than those of these 2 men. This may seem unsettling to you but what's more unsettling is the truth that there are millions of people who claim to adhere to the doctrines of Christianity who have no saving faith in them at all.

Secret discipleship is a misnomer; an oxymoron. Discipleship, by definition is open, visible and vocal. Failure in this area brings dishonor to the Master you claim to serve, it prohibits you from experiencing the depth of fellowship that is available for any and all believers to have with the One who gave His life to save them; plus, it often blocks you from having the necessary fellowship with other disciples. Christians need other Christians and to think otherwise is foolish, arrogant and inviting disaster into your life.

On the other hand, there was something in the death of Jesus that brought these men out of their hiding places. Sure, a guilty conscience has done as much in similar instances but the death of Jesus obviously awakened something in these 2 men and at last, they seemed willing to identify themselves with Jesus.

One final thought: notice that in His burial, Jesus is already taking the first step toward that exaltation at God's hand that is now rightfully His; the exaltation from which He will come forth in power at the end of the age. There was a true day of

suffering when men cursed, laughed, hated and spat on Him. There was a day of humiliation, but that day is now past. It ended with His death. Now even in His burial He is attended with love as those who have the means to care for His body and bury Him honorably minister to Him. It was prophesied. Isaiah tells us that although He was to die in the company of the wicked He would be attended to by the rich in His death ([Isa 53:9](#)). Besides, this is now followed by resurrection victory and His ascent back into heaven and back into His eternal glory.

The Jesus you are asked to follow is not a humiliated Jewish preacher but the Lord of glory. The truth is, He doesn't just ask you to follow Him; He commands it! He commands you to turn from your sin and openly come to Him for salvation. Have you?

John rejoiced to see the salvation that was affected by the death of Jesus. He and countless multitudes rejoice in the eternal significance of the water and blood that flowed from Christ's side. Are you in that number? Are you one who has spread the blood of the perfect Passover upon your doorpost by faith? Have you believed in Jesus? If not, may the spear that pierced Christ's side also prick your heart. 😊