

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 16 March 2008

No. T0513

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Studies in John's Gospel: John 19

John 19 provides an insight into the sufferings of Christ by one of His closest disciples. John was one of the three disciples, Peter James and John, who were chosen by the Lord to be with Him on special occasions. These occasions included the Transfiguration, the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead, and being with Jesus during His agony in the garden of Gethsemane.

At the end of chapter 18, we see the crowd choosing to set free Barabbas rather than Jesus. In chapter 19, John describes how the forces of hatred and expediency set justice aside. He highlights the cruelty and injustice that characterised these profound events. Having declared Jesus to be free of any guilt and seeing Barabbas, a dangerous criminal, go free, Pilate scourges Jesus and delivers Him to the abuse of the soldiers. He delivers an innocent man to the brutality of men devoid of compassion.

Upholding justice is vital to the well being of society. Once other courses are taken in an attempt to try and placate what should be rejected, injustice prospers.

Pilate was convinced of Christ's, innocence and publicly declares, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him." Jesus, the faultless Man, is paraded bloodied, crowned with thorns and dressed in purple. What sense was there in Pilate effectively saying to the crowd, "I want you to know that this innocent man whom I have taken, beaten and humiliated is without fault?" The only sensible conclusion is that Pilate believed that if the crowd saw he had punished an innocent Jesus by scourging Him and humiliating Him with the crown of thorns and purple robe this would be sufficient to quench their appetite for blood. What Pilate he failed to do was to uphold the claims of simple justice in the face of a baying crowd.

Despite this bewildering behaviour, Pilate uses words that now appeal to every Christian heart, "Behold the Man". Confronted by the overwhelming hatred of the very people Jesus had come to reach - Jesus stands, the perfect Man. As the victim of an unjust and violent empire, Jesus stands in all the dignity and power of His suffering love. John writes at the beginning of his Gospel, "He came to His own and His own did not receive him." Like Joseph, a wonderful type of Christ in the Old Testament, who was hated by his own brothers and sold into slavery, so Jesus stands betrayed and hated by those He most loved. As the true Passover lamb about to be slain for the redemption, not only of Israel, but of the whole world, He stands in silent power. Jesus stands, fulfilling the words of the Song of Solomon, "Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it." His sufferings at the hands of Jews and Gentiles could not quench the Lord's divine love, neither could the floods of hatred and injustice drown its force.

It is difficult to imagine what the Lord Jesus felt in His heart when He heard those awful words, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" It is best described in the words of the Psalmist, "Reproach has broken My heart." The rejection of His own people was a bitterness deeply felt by the One who had sought only their blessing.

Pilate's reluctance to submit to the crowd's demands serves to highlight the depths to which the Chief Priests had gone. Pilate, an experienced governor, was well able use violence to subdue unrest but even he was surprised by the fierceness and injustice directed at Jesus. He challenges them again with the words, "You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him."

The Jews response is the accusation of blasphemy, "We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God." What they had failed to recognise was that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. In spite of all the evidence of His life and ministry, they were blind to their own Messiah.

Pilate was disturbed by the thought of Jesus being the Son of God. He is described as being "more afraid" (verse 8). He asks Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus does not respond. Then Pilate then tries to assert his authority, "Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" There is a remarkable contrast here between the power of the highest representative of Roman rule and the power of Jesus. John begins his Gospel by describing the Lord Jesus as the Word. As such He was the One through whom the whole of creation came into being, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning

with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made." Jesus was also the One who, in John 10, said, "I have power to lay down [My life], and I have power to take it again."

Throughout His sufferings, Jesus is marked by a calmness and silence in fulfilment of Isaiah 53:6-7, "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. 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." John records for us one of the few occasions when Jesus speaks. Jesus answered Pilate, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin." The lowly Saviour quietly informs Pilate of the source of all power - God. He also makes clear the direct responsibility for His being brought before Pilate was that of the High Priest. The High Priest who, above all, should have recognised the Messiah, was the one who delivered Him into Roman hands.

Once more, Pilate is affected by the Saviour and actively seeks to release Jesus. However, the politically astute Jewish crowd immediately challenge Pilate's renewed sense of justice, "If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar." It is difficult not to detect in the shrewdness of this challenge, satanic power. Jesus had said to the Chief Priests in the garden of Gethsemane, "When I was with you daily in the temple, you did not try to seize Me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness." The power of darkness was more and more in evidence.

Pilate makes one final effort before giving in to the demands of the crowd. Once more he brings Jesus before the crowd but this time with the words, "Behold your King!" The response is immediate, "Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!" Pilate then asks a very telling question, "Shall I crucify your King?" The reply of the Chief Priests demonstrates that they were not only instruments of the power of darkness but victims of it. They answer Pilate, "We have no king but Caesar!" This is their final act of betrayal, not only of their Saviour but also of their God, and Pilate delivers Jesus to their will.

Jesus takes that final part of His journey to the cross. He bears His own cross to Golgotha, the place of a skull. I remember as a young Christian reading Billy Graham's *Decision Magazine*. In an article on Golgotha, a writer commented on its meaning - the place of a skull. He wrote of it as being an illustration of the head of a man. In a living man, the head is the place of the mind from which comes his understanding and wisdom. The skull was devoid of both and represented death and emptiness. What God did at Calvary was beyond the understanding and wisdom of the natural man. Above the place of a skull, upon the cross Christ demonstrates the wisdom of God through the offering of His own Son, "But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." 1 Corinthians 1:23. Christ by dying brought in life and God's wisdom defeated both sin and death!

Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. It read, JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. It was a title disputed by the Chief Priests but Pilate refused to change it with the memorable words, "What I have written, I have written." What he wrote was true. The name of Jesus was given before His birth and marked Him as the Saviour, "For He will save His people from their sins". The cross was the place where this prophecy was fulfilled.

The attitude of the soldiers during the crucifixion is telling comment on human behaviour. Without compassion, driven by greed to gamble for what little Jesus possessed and indifferent to all that was happening; the soldiers give a brutal insight into how hard the human heart can become. It also shows that we can be so near to the demonstration of the love of God at its most powerful, yet be totally unaffected by it. The greatest danger to the human heart is indifference. Yet this indifference served to prove what Scripture had foretold, "They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots."

In brilliant contrast to the coldness of the soldiers' hearts is the warmth of the Saviour's compassion. The One who needed compassion is the One who gives it! Looking upon Mary, His mother, and seeing John nearby He says, "'Woman, behold your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home." It never ceases to impress me that the Saviour throughout His adult life had worked as a carpenter. He knew what it was, as the eldest son, to support a family and to work with His own hands. He knew the value of family life and was author of it. As Jesus is about to give up His own life, He ensures that those for whom He was responsible are looked after.

In Luke 2, Simeon had taken Jesus in his arms as a tiny baby and said, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation". Moments later he said to Mary, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also." That sword had entered her heart as she saw her son, the Son of God, upon the cross. In those moments Jesus has compassion. From the cross, the Saviour demonstrates to us the value and responsibilities of family life.

The next statement of Jesus from the cross is so short and yet so telling. "After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, 'I thirst!'" It is the cry of a Man at the end of His strength. It is the cry of a Man who has given everything. Yet just at the moment we have an insight into the extent of all that Jesus passed through, He cries again. This time, it is not the cry of an exhausted man but the cry of a victorious Saviour. "It is finished!"

In Hebrews 10:11-14, we read, "And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified."

Down through the centuries, a seemingly endless stream of sacrifices had been made which could never take away sin. From the Tower of Babel, onwards men have also invented their own ways of reaching up to God. But in this one simple statement we find the answer. Christ alone, taking all our need and sin upon Himself, died in our place to bring forgiveness, life and peace to all who trust in His finished work.

After this cry of victory we read, "And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit." In this simple act, we see the power of all that Jesus explained earlier in John 10, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep." (verse 11) and later, "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father." (verses 17-18)

As the Saviour shows all the fullness of God's love amidst the violence of Calvary, we see the nature of the One who is the Prince of Peace: His gentleness in asking forgiveness of those who nailed Him to the tree; His compassion towards the dying thief; His care for His mother; and finally, quietly laying down His life. The Light of the World shines through all the darkness of that bitter day!

John does not spare us the detail of men's pitiless brutality and its surprising source, "Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away." Cruelty is all the more vicious when done in the name of religion. It is shocking when those who should be most compassionate and merciful instead resort to dreadful atrocities.

But Jesus was already dead when the soldiers arrived, and in the last malicious act of mankind against the Saviour, one of them stabs his spear into the Lord's side. This pointless and vindictive act was witnessed by John who writes, "And 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. For these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, 'Not one of His bones shall be broken.' And again another Scripture says, 'They shall look on Him whom they pierced.'" Even man in his most unfeeling and inhuman state is caused to fulfil the word of God.

Just as John does not gloss over the darkness of Calvary and the sufferings of the Son of God he also records its effect in the hearts of the two of Jesus' disciples, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. The remarkable thing about Joseph and Nicodemus was that, until Calvary, they had both been secret disciples because of their fear of the Jews. They were rich, influential men who, because of their positions in society, kept their faith in Christ hidden. Calvary changed their behaviour dramatically. When the Lord's apostles were heartbroken and defeated, it was Joseph who went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus. Joseph and Nicodemus must have seen the Lord die and witnessed both His sufferings and His love. The demonstration of that love had a life changing effect upon them both. They could have been reduced to greater fear of Christ's powerful enemies and gone into hiding. They could have denied knowing Jesus as Peter did. Instead, they were transformed into courageous men willing to be identified with their Saviour in His death.

"After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus."

It is Joseph who takes the initiative to ask for the body of Jesus. Matthew and Mark in their Gospels also record this event. Pilate releases the body of Jesus to His disciple. It is interesting that Pilate, who would not release the innocent Jesus, now releases His body to Joseph. Scripture does not comment on the effect this had on Pilate. But he would have been left with the contrasting and abiding memories of the hatred of the Jewish mob and gentleness of noble Joseph.

Nicodemus joins Joseph in this final ministry to the Saviour. Nicodemus' spiritual journey had begun when Jesus said to him, "You must be born again". He had tried to defend Jesus as the elders plotted the arrest of the Saviour but his advice had been ignored. Whenever Nicodemus is mentioned, John recalls that he came to Jesus by night. Here he

writes, "Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came". Like Joseph, Nicodemus was no longer a secret disciple but openly takes responsibility for the burial of the Lord Jesus.

"And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews' Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby."

In Isaiah 53:8-9 we read of the Messiah, "He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken. 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."

In John 19 we see this prophecy fulfilled. Christ was imprisoned, unjustly judged and then crucified alongside common criminals. Pilate had publicly declared the innocence of Jesus and the Lord had offered His perfect life to answer for our sins. Having died, we now see Him buried by the rich in a new grave. Christ had substituted Barabbas on the cross, He also substitutes the rich owner of a new tomb. In this way the substitutional work of Christ for us, whatever our condition, is illustrated.

John takes up the sacrificial death of Christ in this wonderful chapter of his Gospel. Christ is the great theme and our response to Him the challenge. The crowd hated Christ. Pilate was affected by the Saviour's innocence and the power of His person but ultimately took the pathway of expediency. The soldiers were indifferent to Christ and unaffected by divine love in spite of being such close witnesses of it. Some of the Lord's disciples, as we see in other Scriptures, stood by the cross but were overwhelmed by the situation. But finally two men instead of being overwhelmed by the situation, were overwhelmed by the Saviour's love and sacrifice for them and responded. They committed their lives and resources to the Saviour. The One who loved them was the One they now served.

Of course, it is when we come to the resurrection of Christ we see the completed story. But we shall never truly serve the Saviour until, like Joseph and Nicodemus, the depth of Jesus' love and sacrifice profoundly affect us. A love that, in the final words of Isaac Watts hymn, When I survey the wondrous cross, is "so amazing, so divine" and a love that "demands my soul, my life, my all."

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