

The Death of Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] The Spectator magazine is a magazine I subscribe to and the Easter special came through the letterbox yesterday morning. And as usual, it had a satirical picture on the front.

And this week's picture was the picture of a Russian Orthodox cross. And it had a caricature of Vladimir Putin pulling or trying to pull the cross down.

And the cover story was called Cross to Bear, Can Russia Ever Atone for Putin's Sins? And it just struck me that again and again in our secular culture that would try to dismiss Christianity, to try and talk about anything in a sensible and meaningful way, it has to hijack Christian language and Christian imagery to try and make its point.

And it's language that is usually hijacked in a way that ignores the true meaning of what it's about. So Cross to Bear comes from the Bible. Atone for comes from the Bible.

Sins is a word that has Christian significance that comes from the Bible. And so it's the cross that is the symbol of the Christian faith. People who really have nothing to do with Christianity will be aware that the cross represents the death of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 1 9] Indeed, the cross is at the very heart of the Christian faith. And so we'll never grasp what Christianity is about unless we understand the significance and the meaning of the cross and why so long ago Jesus died on it on a day that we now refer to as Good Friday.

And so tonight I'd like us to look at the death of Jesus. And we'll look at the Gospel of John and his account and we'll see how Jesus died, why Jesus died, and what we must do.

So we're going to move from the historical fact of the death of Jesus onto the theological meaning of the death of Jesus, onto the practical application of the death of Jesus.

In other words, what does it mean for you and what does it mean for me? And so how Jesus died? He died in fulfillment of Scripture. Why Jesus died? He died in our place.

And what we must do, we must believe. So the first of these three points, how Jesus died. Jesus died in fulfillment of Scripture. So John records how Jesus died.

[2 : 2 8] He was sentenced to be crucified by Pilate, who was the Roman governor. And crucifixion was reserved for the most horrendous of criminals because it was one of the cruelest forms of punishment ever devised.

So the victim would be forced to carry their cross to the place of execution. They would be stripped naked and then they would be nailed to the cross. And then they'd hang in the heat for hours, in blistering sunshine even for days.

And to breathe, they would have to push themselves up with their legs and pull with their arms just to survive a bit longer. And it really was a slow and painful torture.

And all was ended in death. And yet interestingly, John spares us all the gruesome details of Jesus' crucifixion. I wonder if you noticed that from the reading.

All he does is tell us they crucified him. Verse 18. So John's focus is not on the actual event of the crucifixion and how bloody and awful and painful it was.

[3 : 37] John's focus is on how the death of Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture. In other words, he's telling us how Jesus died. And as he does so, he wants to emphasize that what took place happened because the Scripture said it would.

It was all part of God's plan. And that's why the word Scripture appears four times in the reading. So firstly, when the soldiers who crucified Jesus were dividing up his clothes, we read this.

Verse 24. Let's not tear it, they said to one another. Let's decide by lot who will get it. This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled. That said, they divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

The fulfillment of Scripture. Secondly, when Jesus speaks from the cross, we read, later knowing that everything had now been finished and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, I am thirsty.

The fulfillment of Scripture. Then thirdly, after Jesus had died and the soldiers were taking the bodies off the crosses, we read, verse 36, these things happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled.

[4 : 59] And so the fact that they didn't even need to break Jesus' legs isn't just an incidental comment by John. Again, it was to fulfill Scripture.

And then fourthly, as they look at Jesus on the cross with his pierced side, we read in verse 37, and as another Scripture says, they will look on the one they have pierced.

So how Jesus died, right down to the very last detail, was in fulfillment of Scripture. So things that were said hundreds, even thousands of years beforehand, were all happening in those few hours as Jesus hung on the cross.

So why does this matter? Well, it matters because when it comes to Good Friday, we should never think that Jesus was somehow a tragic victim of circumstance.

This is not some freak accident that couldn't be stopped. No, in what Jesus said, and in what he did, and in what his executioners said, and in what they did before he died, during his death, and after his death, everything happened so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

[6 : 17] Which means Jesus deliberately died as part of God's purposes. To the extent that even his killers were unwittingly involved in the process.

And so Jesus' death is the climax of everything that the Old Testament Scriptures are pointing towards. And so that's the first thing John wants to show us.

He wants to show us how Jesus died. He died in fulfillment of Scripture. Secondly, why Jesus died. He died in our place. And there's a number of things in this Bible passage that point to this fact.

That's why the last words of Jesus are significant. What were they? Well, Jesus said, I am thirsty. And then after receiving a drink, the last thing Jesus said before he died was, it is finished.

Well, what did he mean? One thing he surely meant was that his life was just about over. But when Jesus said, it is finished, he meant far more. Because Jesus was saying here that the work God gave him to do was completed.

[7 : 27] In other words, he was declaring mission accomplished or job done. So this wasn't some kind of desperate mumble of defeat. No, this was an exclamation of triumph, of achievement, and of victory.

The sentence, it is finished, in our English translation, is actually just one word in the original Greek, the word tetelestai. And it means to finish, to fulfill, to complete, to end, to pay.

Apparently, it was written across receipts when a debt had been paid and nothing else was owed. It's like saying, paid in full, having that stamped on your receipt.

So why did Jesus say this? Well, it's because Jesus' death on the cross completed the work of paying for our sins. God sent Jesus to die in the place of sinful people like me and like you.

Because we have all failed to worship God and love God and obey God as we should. And we all know that in our heart of hearts. When it comes to our relationship with God, none of us have passed.

[8 : 43] All of us have failed. And whether we deliberately or neglectfully ignore God and turn from God, however we do it, we commit a crime against the God who made us.

And God in his justice can't tolerate our rebellion against him. He must punish it. Our sins need to be paid for if we are to be rescued and saved from God's just condemnation.

And so on the cross, Jesus was bearing the wrath of God against our sin in our place. And so when Jesus said, it is finished, he was announcing that he had paid the price in full.

Nothing more needed to be done. That's why we read that he bowed his head and gave up his spirit in verse 30. So Jesus gave up his life.

Nobody took his life from him. Jesus willingly sacrificed himself in our place as our substitute. And John, in his gospel, drills this home even further with all his references to the Passover.

[9 : 53] You might think, why the Passover? What's the Passover? What's the significance? Well, Jesus was crucified during the Passover feast. So John says that it was the day of preparation.

Verse 31. That is the day of preparation of the Passover, which is verse 14. And so the Passover was celebrated by God's people, by the Israelites.

It was rooted way back in the Old Testament when God rescued his people from their slavery in Egypt. And at the first Passover, what they had to do was slaughter a lamb and then smear the blood of the lamb on the door frames of their house.

And then God passed over their homes and their firstborn were saved, whereas the firstborn of the Egyptians were killed. And so the Passover lamb was sacrificed as a substitute.

And now here is Jesus being sacrificed at the same time as all these Passover lambs are being sacrificed. Why? Because Jesus came to die as a substitute for us.

[10 : 57] So Jesus is the Passover lamb who was slain so that his people could be saved. That's why John has got all these subtle references throughout this passage to the Passover.

So Jesus drank from a sponge that was lifted up on a stalk of the hyssop plant. Do you know where the hyssop plant is mentioned in the Bible? At the first Passover, when it was the hyssop plant that they dipped in the blood of the lamb and painted the door frames of their houses with.

And so John here is also keen to state that the soldiers didn't break Jesus' legs on the cross. And it's because the Passover lamb had to be without defect, physically flawless.

In other words, none of its bones were to be broken. And here is Jesus, God's perfect Passover lamb, without blemish, and guess what?

With no broken bones. And so it's all saying to us loudly and clearly that our sins deserve God's punishment and yet God has sent Jesus to die in our place as our substitute so that God's judgment can pass over us.

[12 : 13] And it can pass over us because it fell on Jesus as he died on the cross. I recently read the book *Miracle on the River Kwai*. I don't know if you've ever read it or heard of it, but it's a fantastic book written by a guy called Captain Ernest Gordon who was a young Scottish prisoner of war.

And he wrote *Miracle on the River Kwai* to tell of his experiences at the hands of the Japanese as they were forced to work in the Burma-Siam railway. You've probably heard of the movie *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*.

Well, Ernest Gordon wrote this book to explain, in a sense, what really happened. And so listen to what he says, this incident in his book. The day's work had ended. The tools were being counted as usual.

As the party was about to be dismissed, the Japanese guard shouted that a shovel had been missing. He insisted that someone had stolen it to sell to the Thais. Striding up and down before the men, he ranted and denounced them for their wickedness and, most unforgivable of all, their ingratitude to the emperor.

As he raved, he worked himself up into a paranoid fury. Screaming in broken English, he demanded that the guilty one step forward to take his punishment. No one moved.

[13 : 30] The guard's rage reached new heights of violence. All die, all die, he shrieked. To show that he meant what he said, he cocked his rifle, put it to his shoulder and looked down the sights, ready to fire at the first man in the line.

At that moment, the Argyle soldier stepped forward, stood stiffly to attention and said calmly, I did it.

The guard unleashed all his whipped-up hate. He kicked the helpless prisoner and beat him with his fists. Still, the Argyle stood rigidly to attention with the blood streaming down his face.

His silence goaded the guard to an excess of rage. Seizing his rifle by the barrel, he lifted it high over his head and with a final blow brought it down on the skull of the soldier who sank limply to the ground and did not move.

Although it was perfectly clear that he was dead, the guard continued to beat him and stopped only when exhausted. The men of the work-deedil picked up their comrade's body, shouldered their tools and marched back to camp.

[14 : 38] When the tools were counted again at the guardhouse, no shovel was missing. It's a harrowing story, isn't it? And it's a moving story, too, of one man who was willing to give up his life to save others.

And when he did that, it had such an impact on the camp that the whole camp atmosphere changed. And people, instead of looking out for themselves, looked out for their fellow soldiers.

And yet, when we think of the sacrifice of Jesus, Jesus was prepared to sacrifice himself on the cross. And it is astonishing. It is astounding.

It is almost unbelievable, but that we're reading that it happened. And it has had such a powerful impact on our world. And it changes lives, the lives of people who are here tonight.

And it changes the lives of people across our world. And the reason why the sacrifice of Jesus is so powerful is because Jesus died in our place to save us from an eternity in hell.

[15 : 45] And so that takes us to our third point, what we must do. First, how Jesus died? He died in fulfillment of Scripture. Second, why Jesus died? He died in our place. Third, what we must do?

We must believe. That's why we can't walk away from Good Friday thinking, this has got nothing to do with me. This is for those people who are serious about God, those Christian people who've got nothing better to do with their lives than to believe all of this stuff.

Well, what happened when Jesus died on the cross has implications for all of us. And so John recorded this account of the death of Jesus, not just because it happened, and he's a good historian, but because I am to believe in Jesus, and I am to believe that Jesus died for me, and you are to believe that Jesus died for you, so you are to believe in him.

And this is what John says. Let me read verse 35 again. He says, the man who saw it, that's John, the author of his gospel, the man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true.

He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. So John, the author, has recorded all of this to urge you and me, his readers, to believe.

[17 : 15] In other words, we can believe in Jesus, and when we do, we have Jesus pay the price for our sin. Because if we don't believe in Jesus, then we have to pay the price for our sin ourselves, and we pay it in hell.

Because if God sent Jesus on a mission to die in my place, then I must believe, or Good Friday will never be good for me.

You must believe or Good Friday will never be good for you. Because we can only receive the benefits of Jesus' death by believing that he is the Son of God who came to die for me, in my place, for my sin.

And that's why John directly addresses us as the reader urging us to believe. How do we believe? Well, if you're still not sure what you believe about Jesus, all you need to do is confess your sins to God, telling him that you're sorry, and believing that Jesus Christ died in your place to forgive you.

And it's an offer that is extended to everybody, no matter who we are, and no matter what we have done, or what we have made with our lives. We all must believe.

[18 : 35] And when we believe, it changes us forever. that is why Jesus came. He came to suffer and die in our place so that we might believe in him and receive the benefit of all that he has done through his death and his resurrection to be accepted by God.

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