

Text: John 19:1-37

Title: "Believe because of the ironic power of His death"

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Introduction: The great English playwright, William Shakespeare, often used dramatic irony to create his plays. One example is the ending of his "Romeo and Juliet." These lovers, although both still alive, suffer under the false impression that each other is deceased, and consequently they simultaneously take their own lives separately in tragic despair. All along, the audience knows what neither Romeo nor Juliet does, simply that the other one is alive. This kind of dramatic irony can make for interesting literature and drama.

The Scripture is both the Word of God and great literature, and perhaps nowhere better than in John's description of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ does this Holy-Spirit-inspired author use dramatic irony to let us readers know what is truly going on in a way that Pilate, the chief priests, the soldiers, and even John and the faithful women at the foot of the cross did not understand at the time.

Jesus, of course, understood exactly what was going on (19:28, cp. 13:1). Looking back, John writes so that we can know now what Jesus knew then, so that we would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life through His name (20:31).

This ironic power of the death of Jesus is well illustrated by a line in Bryan Henderson's hymn, "Praise the Mighty King": "To the cross our Lord was nailed and with each blow the darkness failed. Death has lost its sting today, as Christ has giv'n to us the Way." Charles Wesley put that same beautiful irony this way: "Tis mystery all, the immortal dies. Who can explain this strange [ironic] design? In vain the firstborn seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine."

The lines of these hymns about the death of Christ are beautiful irony. Every blow of the hammer on the nail that crucified our Lord caused the darkness to fail more and more. When Jesus died, it was the immortal One who died. None of this did Pilate know, nor the high priests, nor anyone else in this chapter at the time, except of course Christ Himself.

John looks back in this wonderful chapter to help us see for ourselves what Jesus saw all along about the ironic power of His suffering and death. I believe the Apostle John highlights for us at least seven truths about the ironic powerful death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary.

I. The Roman soldiers mock the Royal One (vv. 1-3).

Illustration: Today is Palm Sunday, the day we remember Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. That happened on the Saturday prior to the events of this chapter's Wednesday, I believe, in AD 31. Then crowds hailed Jesus as the Son of David and called for Him to save them from Roman oppression.

Application: Now, less than a week later, the Romans are having their say. In contrast to the Saturday before, they form a wreath from a plant with long thorns for a mock crown. They clothe Jesus in a purple robe and mockingly mimic insincere praise of this Son of David. They beat Jesus with their fists. The language here tells us this went on for a while.

Other Gospels tell us that Jesus was blindfolded for this striking of His face. After each blow, the sarcastic question would come from the unbeliever, "Prophesy, who is it that smote thee?" (Luke 22:64). I have often wondered how the anonymous persecutor might have reacted had Jesus answered his question with the accuracy and precise knowledge He possessed. That would have instantly changed the scene. The soldiers would have stopped mocking, recognizing Jesus's true royalty. We must recognize what they could not see.

It is the pride of the human heart that thinks it can mock Jesus and get away with it. Paul warns however, "Be not deceived. God is not mocked. For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). The day is coming when every knee shall bow in reverence, when every tongue shall confess in sincerity that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. In that day, the New Hampshire legislature is going to insist that their invocations be made only in Jesus's name.

What about our lives makes a mockery of the kingship of Jesus Christ over us? May we not mock the Royal One as these soldiers did by our disobedience to His royal commands.

II. The Jewish priests accuse the Innocent One (vv. 4-9).

Illustration: It is tragic when someone is falsely accused and punished for a crime he did not commit. I read a story about a man released last October who had served 40 years of a life prison sentence because he was wrongly convicted of murdering his college roommate back in 1980. In 1980 I was a sophomore in high school. Imagine losing all those years.

Application: The injustice born here by Jesus is even worse. The Jewish authorities want Him dead, accusing Him of blasphemy. This was nothing new. Their accusation was well expressed in John 10:33, "The Jews answered him, saying, For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God." Jesus is both man and God, so His true claim was no blasphemy. Ignorant of such Jewish concerns and operating under Roman law, Pilate tells the truth of the matter - there is no legal charge that can be found against Him (v. 4).

Jesus is God's unblemished Passover Lamb. He lived a sinless life. Where He accepted worship as God, it was because He is God. As Luke says in Hebrews, "For such a high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate

from sinners, and made higher than the heavens" (7:26). As both Lamb and High Priest, Jesus is the innocent One, although accused by these Jewish authorities of their worst sin.

Jesus lived that innocent life so that He could offer it to us in exchange for our sinful life. Remember the example of Joshua, Israel's high priest clothed with filthy garments in Zechariah 3:3. The angel of the Lord did not leave him like this: "And he answered and spake unto those that stood before him, saying, Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment. And I said, Let them set a fair mitre upon his head. So they set a fair mitre upon his head, and clothed him with garments" (vv. 4-5).

Those clean garments represented the righteousness of Christ. Because it is the Innocent One whom the high priests ironically accuse, we can stand in His innocence just as He stood in our sin on the cross before holy God. Have you ever exchanged your filthy robes, your sin, for His clean garments?

### III. Pilate controls the One in control (vv. 10-11).

Application: Commentators point out that there is great emphasis in Pilate's question in verse 10 on the word *me*. We might translate, "To me do you not answer?" The question, of course, is followed up by Pilate's claim to authority over Jesus's fate and so to complete control over Him.

Jesus corrects Pilate. Whatever authority Pilate has was given to him from heaven. As Paul writes in Romans 13, "The powers that be are ordained of God." In addition, Pilate needed to understand that it is the One who delivered Jesus to Pilate who has the greater sin. So who is this? I believe that John is very clear that it is Jesus who is delivering Himself to Pilate. We saw in the last chapter how that Jesus was in control in the Garden of Gethsemane, assuring His arrest. He made clear

in John 10:17-18: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh 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 commandment have I received of my Father." Though they tried, the Jews were not able to stone Him because His hour had not come.

With this truth Jesus explains that since He has delivered Himself to Pilate, He alone has the greater sin. In truth, He shall soon be the sin bearer of the whole world. 2 Cor. 5:21, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." 1 Pet. 2:24, "Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed." Isa. 53:6, "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

It was not just iron stakes that were nailed into Christ's body on the cross. Our sins were nailed on Him as well. Your sins and mine were placed on Christ so He would suffer the punishment from God that we deserved. Although Pilate thought he was in control, it was actually Christ Himself, the High Priest and the Lamb, who was administering this sacrifice.

Like Pilate, we often live like we can control this One who is truly in control. We chase our own pursuits rather than seeking to follow Him. This illusion works until things spiral out of control, and then we learn again who is really in control. We need to submit in faith to His control from the first moments of each day, because it is He who is always in control.

IV. The Jewish priests crucify their Messiah (vv. 12-22).

Illustration: Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris responded negatively to two attendees at one of her rallies who were shouting, "Jesus is Lord." She quipped, "Oh, you guys are at the wrong rally. I think you meant to go to the

smaller one down the street." The larger part of her audience then roared with cheers as the two were removed.

Application: There is probably nothing worse a Jewish leader could have ever said than, "We have no king but Caesar." This may have been the bridge too far for Joseph and Nicodemus (vv. 38-42). Throughout church history, false religious leaders have had no king but Caesar. In secular history, political pundits claim that there is no king but civil government.

For these Jews, their denial of any other king is not only a denial of Jesus Christ, the true Messiah, but also a denial of the entire Messianic hope of Old Testament prophecy. For our nation, to have no king but Caesar is to believe that our rights come from government with its governmental documents rather than from God. Rights that come from any godless source cannot be inalienable or nontransferable rights. Rights that come from government or governmental documents can change when governments and their documents change.

Admit it or not, everyone has a higher King than Caesar. His name is King Jesus, and we must obey Him above all others.

V. The soldiers stole from the Providing One (vv. 23-27).

Application: These Roman soldiers had never read Psalm 22, but they fulfilled it perfectly in their greed (v. 24). At first, their intention is to divide up the now naked Savior's clothing equally. But doing so with the seamless tunic would ruin its value, and coveting that value, they instead gamble to see to whom it would belong. Psalm 22 said they would do so roughly 1000 years earlier.

Contrasted with their greed is the suffering Savior's concern for the provision of His mother. Joseph is deceased, and Jesus's brothers are not yet believers. John is Mary's nephew and Jesus's cousin, and John receives and accepts the respon-

sibility of caring for this loved one. He does so knowing that in Christ's eyes he also is a loved one (v. 26). We must care for our family's needs knowing that we too are loved.

#### VI. Vinegar ends thirst for the Finishing One (vv. 28-30).

Application: Here remained one more moment of suffering to fulfill one more prophecy of Scripture. Psalm 69:21, "They gave me also gall for my meat; and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." Not one detail of Jesus's mission to suffer for our sins went missing. He completed it perfectly, or else we would be lost forever. He truly affirmed, "It is finished."

How have we done completing the tasks He has entrusted to us as His witnesses and as church members? How many important details have we failed to complete? How many significant opportunities left undone? How many crucial responsibilities neglected? How blessed we are that our salvation depends on how well Jesus completed His mission and not on how we are completing ours. Yet we must do better for Him.

#### VII. The legs remain whole for the Pierced One (vv. 31-37).

Application: John the author refers to himself as a true witness of some remarkable facts at the close of the ironic drama of Calvary (v. 35) – that somehow Jesus's legs were not broken as was typical of crucifixion to speed the agonizing death of the victims, and instead Jesus's side was pierced. Out of the side first flowed a fountain of blood and then of water.

John himself seems to be amazed as he writes those remarkable words once again in this chapter, "that the Scripture might be fulfilled." Centuries earlier it said Jesus's bones would not be broken in Psalm 34:20. The Passover Lamb was to have no broken bones (Exod. 12:46). The Scripture also said that Jesus would be pierced in Zechariah 12:10. Undoubtedly, as John remembered the blood and water that flowed from

Jesus's side, he must have remembered the truth of Zechariah 13:1 as well, "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness." The blood flowed from this Fountain for our sin, and the water flowed from Him for uncleanness.

Conclusion: And so all this irony about the powerful death of Jesus Christ adds up to the gospel of good news for you and me as sinners. Soldiers mocked the Royal One, but we can make Him our King. Priests accused the Innocent One, but we can be clothed in His righteousness. Pilate controlled the One in control, but we can submit to His sovereignty each day. Priests crucify their Messiah, but we can have Him as our greater King than Caesar. Soldiers stole from the Providing One, but we can be generous with what He has given us. And because vinegar ended the thirst for the Finishing One and legs remained unbroken for the Pierced One, we can have a perfect Savior in Jesus Christ, and believing have life in His name. Do you believe?

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*