

The Overwhelming Death of Christ

John 19:28-37

Good Friday observance

I was raised Roman Catholic, and the Holy Week observances were a big part of my spiritual formation, including Good Friday. Though we Protestants have rightly rejected the elaborate system of holy days and special observances that make up the Roman Catholic calendar, yet I think it is beneficial for us Baptists to observe Good Friday. Though we certainly preach Christ crucified every week on Sundays, and think daily of the significance of the cross of Christ, yet a Good Friday service gives us a chance to slow down, to pause, and to look again at the specific details connected with the actual death of our Savior on the cross.

So this evening, we're looking at the account of Jesus' death from the Gospel of John; John 19:28-37. You just heard the account read a moment ago.

I want to assert right away how important John's account is of the death of Christ because John was an actual eyewitness. He was standing right there while Jesus was dying. He adds some specific details to our knowledge of the death of Christ that we could have no other way. One of those details is the fact that one of the soldiers drove a spear up into Jesus' side to confirm that he was already dead... and when he did, blood and water came flowing out.

He strongly emphasized his personal eyewitnessing of this fact:

John 19:35 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.

The reason this is so important is that every aspect of Jesus life, death, and resurrection are established as HISTORICAL FACT.

The role of eyewitness testimony is VITAL:

Luke 1:1-4 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

SO THAT WE MAY KNOW THE CERTAINTY of the things we have been taught.

1 John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

2 Peter 1:16 We did not follow cleverly invented myths when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

“Cleverly invented myths...”

Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection were not cleverly devised FABLES or MYTHS or even spiritual parables designed to teach us some moralistic lesson.

You have heard of NARNIA... the fantasy world devised by C.S. Lewis in his world-famous “Chronicles of Narnia” ... a fantasy world that four British children, Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy reached through a wardrobe in a spare room in an English country mansion.

Readers of Lewis’s works can derive spiritual benefit from his tales, all the while knowing they are works of fantasy, pure fiction.

So also JRR Tolkien’s fantasy world of “Middle Earth” with the Shire, Gondor, Mirkwood, and Mordor being fantasy locations, an Aragorn, Galdalf, and Frodo being fictitious characters.

These were “cleverly invented myths”

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection however are not the work of fiction writers... they were all of them matters of HISTORICAL FACT based on the sober testimony of eyewitnesses.

As a matter of fact, the Apostle Paul goes so far as to say if Christ has actually not been physically and actually raised from the dead:

1 Corinthians 15:14-15 if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead.

1 Corinthians 15:17-18 if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

So it really matters a TON whether or not Christ really lived, whether or not Christ really said and did the things the Gospels record that he did, whether or not Christ really died on the cross, and whether or not Christ really actually rose from the dead.

The Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are all written based on the testimonies of eyewitnesses who saw Jesus personally.

Over the centuries, many false teachers have arisen to trouble the church with questions about these very things. Some early false teachers were called "Docetists" ... from the Greek "dokeo" (to SEEM), that Jesus wasn't really truly a human being, but that he only SEEMED to be one. Others raised questions about Jesus' death, saying he only SEEMED to be dead on the cross, but actually just SWOONED, fainted, and was merely presumed to be dead. Some theologically liberal scholars have questioned the Gospel records as faulty, because they contained miracles... so they looked on them as religious myths – and these scholars, like a man named Rudolph Bultmann, sought to "demythologize" the accounts of Jesus. This led others to a so-called "quest for the historical Jesus."

But all of this is foolish unbelief. The gospel records themselves are written as history, based on the testimonies of eyewitnesses,

including that of the Apostle John here in this nineteenth chapter of his Gospel.

Based on these gospel records, we may have a strong sense of the truthfulness, the absolute certainty of what we have been taught.

Jesus actually lived... fully God and fully human.

Jesus actually died... literally died

Jesus actually rose from the dead... physically, bodily

THEREFORE...

Our sins are actually forgiven

We ourselves will actually be raised from the grave

We ourselves will actually live forever!

ASSURANCE! Certainty!

The account of these details give us an intensification of our awareness of these truths, these historically accurate accounts.

And the account of Jesus' death in John 19:28-37 gives us that certainty.

The evidence is that Jesus died at exactly the right time to fulfill prophecy, to fulfill the plan God had made for the salvation of sinners all over the world. Yes, there were events that led up to his trial;

Satan did in fact put betraying Jesus in the mind of Judas Iscariot

Judas Iscariot did in fact conspire with the chief priests and teachers of the law to hand Jesus over to them.

This he did by identifying Jesus with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The chief priests, teachers of the law, and the Pharisees did arrest Jesus and bring him to the house of Annas, the High Priest. Annas and Caiaphas did in fact condemn Jesus to death on the testimony of false witnesses. They did in fact hand Jesus over to the Pontius Pilate, and then pressured Pilate and forced him and threatened him to condemn Jesus to death.

Pilate did in fact turn Jesus over to his soldiers, who mocked him and flogged him, spat upon him and beat him. All of that is true. Then they did in fact lead him away to Golgotha where they crucified him with two other men – two robbers – one on his right and one on his left, with Jesus in the middle.

YES, YES, YES... all these human actors did these clear human actions and all of them were responsible for their decisions.

BUT they were all merely servants of Almighty God, carrying out the plan God had made with his own Son before the foundation of the world.

Acts 2:22-23 Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

Acts 4:27-28 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

Before the foundation of the world, God had determined to save sinners by the death of his only begotten Son.

God established prophecies to identify the Savior... and one of the most important was animal sacrifice. God established the Passover at the time of the Exodus, the tenth and final plague on Egypt – the dreadful plague on the firstborn.

The Passover Lamb was set aside by every Jewish family; it was to be sacrificed, slaughtered at twilight, and then its blood was to be painted on the doorposts and lintels of every Jewish home. When the angel of death would see the blood of the sacrifice, he would pass over that home and not kill the firstborn in that house.

Part of the law concerning the Passover Lamb was that not a single bone of the lamb was to be broken:

Exodus 12:46 "It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones.

Numbers 9:11-12 They are to eat the lamb, together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ¹² They must not leave any of it till morning or break any of its bones. When they celebrate the Passover, they must follow all the regulations.

Jesus died at just the right time to fulfill this prophecy. Usually death by crucifixion takes a long time, sometimes even days. But Jesus died at just the right time:

John 10:17-18 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life-- only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

So at just the right time, Jesus gave up his spirit of his own choice:

John 19:28-30 Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. ³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

If he had died even a few moments later, his bones would have been smashed by the soldiers:

John 19:31-33 Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left

on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. ³² The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

There was a clear Jewish law against leaving dead bodies up on a tree overnight:

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 *If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, ²³ you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.*

So these Jewish legalists were trying to avoid the defilement of the Passover by allowing these dead bodies to remain on the tree overnight. The soldiers, in conformity to this Jewish demand, brought a huge mallet and smashed the legs of the first man, and then those of the other. This would prevent these men from pushing up with their legs and gulping for air. Also the shock of this assault would greatly hasten death.

But the soldiers were stunned that Jesus was already dead. He had fulfilled all the prophecies he could while still alive, and he had pillowed his head on his chest and simply given up his spirit.

In this way, the prophecy was fulfilled: "Not a bone will be broken."

But the physical cause of death was more violent than we can possibly imagine. The proof of it was when one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear and blood and water flowed out:

John 19:34 *Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.*

There has been so much discussion of this, and there are many themes that one could pick up here.

I was listening to a sermon by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who before he was a preacher was a royal physician. He also cited research done by another medical expert that this flow of water and blood was clear evidence that Jesus died of a ruptured heart.

Lloyd-Jones added as evidence the overwhelming stress Jesus was under as proven by the great drops of blood he sweat out in Gethsemane:

Luke 22:44 And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

This anguish was no doubt caused by the terrible cup of God's wrath he was required to drink in order to save his people from their sins:

Mark 14:36 "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

This cup represents the aggressive pure holy wrath God the Father rightly feels against all sin, all violation of his holy laws:

Psalm 75:8 In the hand of the LORD is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs.

Revelation 14:10 he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath.

There is no man in history who understood the holy wrath of God better than the Son of God. Jesus experienced hell on earth while he was dying on the cross... so he cried out in his infinite anguish

Mark 15:34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This anguish, this sense of total abandonment by God, was poured full strength into the mind, the soul, the body of Jesus as our substitute:

Isaiah 53:4-6 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Jesus' sufferings on the cross were of such a magnitude that we could readily conceive of his heart actually rupturing under the strain. Whether it did or it did not, there is no doubt that the eyewitness John put much stock in the physical evidence of Jesus' actual death, his bloody death, his violent death, his literal death:

John 19:34-35 one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. ³⁵ 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.

Believe WHAT? In this immediate case, it is this: Believe that Jesus was truly human and that he was truly dead. His death on the cross is an actual atoning sacrifice for the sins of all who believe in him.

Meditation on this agony, these details, is necessary for us. It enables us to HATE THE SIN that resulted in such an agonizing death. It also greatly increases our sense of limitless OBLIGATION to Jesus Christ:

Personal holiness

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Service and witness to others:

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he

died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf was a German nobleman, born in the year 1700 into a life of ease and privilege. He was a moral man, a Christian, who was seeking to live a good life. But one day as a teenager, he was arrested by a powerful painting at an art museum in Dusseldorf. It was by Italian master Domenico Feti, called "Ecce Homo" ("Behold the Man") and it depicted the crucified Christ in agony on the cross. At the bottom of the painting was this caption: "All this I have done for you? Now what will you do for me?" Zinzendorf was shattered by that question. He had an almost mystical experience right then and there beholding the sufferings of Christ for his sins. He was determined for the rest of his life to live openly for Christ and to use his wealth and his position of power and influence to spread the gospel of Christ. He became the leader of the Moravian Church who were trailblazers in the Protestant missions movement even before William Carey.

Christ's death does indeed pay every debt for all who come to him in faith. But it also wraps us up in a loving debt for the rest of our lives... to live for him who died for us; to live for others who need him.

As Isaac Watts put it so powerfully in his hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross":

"Love so amazing, so divine DEMANDS my soul, my life, my ALL!"