

“The Scripture Might Be Fulfilled”

The Sixtieth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

John 19:31-42; Exodus 12:43-51

Jesus was dead. If there were any doubts, the spear thrust into his side confirmed the obvious. The end of the day was drawing near, and according to Jewish law, Jesus’ body must be buried before sundown. The women devoted to Jesus, along with his mother Mary, have watched the entire gory spectacle and now must bury their beloved. Two surprising figures step forward and ensure that Jesus receive a proper burial. They secure a tomb and the spices necessary for embalming. But even as Jesus’ body is removed from the cross and prepared for burial two things are clear to the readers of John’s Gospel. The first is that the way in which Jesus died fulfilled a number of Old Testament prophecies which pointed ahead to the coming of the Messiah. The second is that even though Jesus’ last words were “it is finished,” Jesus spoke about “rising again from the dead” three days later—it was finished, but yet it wasn’t. But on this terrible Friday afternoon, no one was thinking about such a possibility. Those who loved Jesus and who had believed in him were in shock and grieving deeply. They could not see, nor yet understand that Jesus’ final words meant that the guilt of their sins had been removed and their debt to God was now paid in full. Because Jesus had conquered sin and Satan, he will be raised from the dead, and conquer even death and the grave.

Because of the horrors associated with crucifixion, we are almost relieved when we read in John 19:30 that Jesus cried out “*it is finished*” and then “*bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*” John recounts that Jesus endured unspeakable anguish, pain, and suffering from the moment he was arrested until the moment he died. Our Lord has been hit in the face by the high priest’s servant, beaten repeatedly, flogged twice by Pilate (the second in preparation for his crucifixion), before being crucified—one of the cruelest and most painful forms of execution known to man. While the physical pain must have been absolutely unbearable, we must not forget the humiliation to which Jesus was also subjected. Jesus was rejected by his people (Israel), he was betrayed by one of his own disciples, denied by another, before being abandoned by the rest. Only John remained to watch as Jesus died. Jesus was found guilty by a kangaroo court which could produce no evidence against him, and even the man who ultimately put him to death (Pilate, the Roman governor), repeatedly proclaimed Jesus’ innocence.

Death is ugly. There can be no doubt that Jesus’ bruised, beaten, and bloodied body was a horrible sight to those who loved him and who remained with Jesus to the bitter end, when Jesus’ physical agony finally ended and he gave up his spirit (a euphemism for death). What those witnessing this awful spectacle could not have known is that Jesus’ physical pain and humiliation paled in comparison to that terrible and yet mysterious moment when the Father poured out his wrath upon his son—when Jesus drank the cup of wrath down to the last drop. Lost in the terrible scene before those watching was the fact that Jesus had completed his mission of accomplishing our redemption. The debt of all those for whom Jesus died, is paid in full. Jesus laid down his life for his sheep.

We can but imagine the chaos throughout Jerusalem that day—on the part of the Romans, the Jewish religious leaders who finally were rid of their chief nemesis, the people of Israel who knew not what to make of what just happened, the disciples who were now in hiding, as well as the women who loved Jesus, and who will prepare his body for burial. It was the longest and strangest day any of them had

ever experienced. When Jesus died, the sky turned black as night. There was a frightening earthquake which shook the city. Most likely no one yet noticed that the veil in the temple, separating the Holy of Holies from the Most Holy Place was torn from top to bottom—the sure sign that the Jerusalem temple was now *ichabod*, the glory of God having departed.

It was indeed a very long day, it was now after three o'clock in the afternoon, and darkness would fall in just hours. Yet for many involved, the day was not over. Jesus's body must be taken from the cross, washed and prepared for burial—wrapped in linen and embalmed with over seventy pounds of pungent spices. There was still much to do for those bone-weary and grief-stricken followers of Jesus, who had awakened that morning to the news of Jesus' arrest and trial only to witness events lurch out of control as the day progressed. No doubt they heard and saw the mobs outside Pilate's headquarters shouting for Jesus to be put to death. They had seen Herod in the city when the king entered Pilate's headquarters to see Jesus for himself. No one had ever seen or experienced anything like it. But there was a new sense of urgency as the Passover was about to end and Jesus' body was not yet buried. In John 19:31-42 (our text), we will read about those remarkable events associated with the burial of Jesus in a garden tomb, near the site of the crucifixion.

Before we turn to our text, it is important to note that today is Palm Sunday. Since John recounts the events of Palm Sunday in chapter 12—and we spent many weeks since considering Jesus' Upper Room Discourse and the events of our Lord's Passion, although I am not preaching a "Palm Sunday" sermon today, it is important to remember that the death of Jesus is especially shocking in light of what happened just five days earlier (on Palm Sunday), when Jesus entered Jerusalem in great triumph in a grand messianic spectacle. How did things turn around so quickly and dramatically between Sunday and Friday? John's explanation is very simple. These things happened in order to fulfill messianic prophecy and because Jesus obeyed the Father's will to accomplish our salvation.

As for the balance of our Easter week services at Christ Reformed, in the providence of God, we come to the account of Jesus' resurrection next Sunday (Easter) in the opening verses of John 20. On Maundy Thursday we will consider the events of Jesus' passion by reviewing the Bread of Life Discourse in John 6, and then on Good Friday we will consider the author of Hebrew's perspective on Jesus' death as the full and complete payment for our sins.

So, with the events which preceded Jesus' death on Friday (the Passover) in mind, we turn to the account of Jesus' burial, in which we find another series of historical events which fulfill biblical prophecy and summon all those who read and hear this gospel to faith in Jesus Christ. We begin in verse 31, when John gives us the precise day of Jesus' crucifixion. *"Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would 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."*

As I mentioned previously, there is a longstanding debate among both students and critics of Scripture about the chronology of the crucifixion and celebration of the Passover meal found in John's Gospel, in contrast to that of the synoptics. John's account clearly indicates that Jesus celebrated the Passover on Thursday evening—since the Passover began at sundown on Thursday—which Jews considered to be the beginning of the annual Passover, dusk Thursday through dusk Friday. Since the Passover that year fell on a Friday, it was also the Day of Preparation for a special Sabbath (a "high day"). On this day, Jews got ready to celebrate both the weekly Sabbath (which began at sundown Friday), which as the Sabbath following the Passover, also was a special Sabbath—like in those years when Christmas falls on a Sunday.

This means that the Passover and the weekly but special Sabbath fall on consecutive days (Friday and Saturday). Confusion arises, however, because the weekly Sabbath was also a special Sabbath, a “high Sabbath as John calls it. Mosaic law required that on the Sabbath after the Passover, a special offering (the sheaf offering) was to be offered as recounted in Leviticus 23:9-12. *“And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. And on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to the Lord.’”* The debate then centers around whether or not the Day of Preparation is the day *before* the Passover (Thursday), or the day *before* the special Sabbath (Friday).

Although many are convinced that the Day of Preparation is the day of preparation for the Passover (Thursday), there is strong and compelling evidence that John is referring to preparations for the special Sabbath (Saturday). Friday (Passover) was a religious holiday—to use a contemporary category. But it was also the day on which everyone prepared for the weekly day of rest on Saturday (along with the ritual observance of the Sabbath when people were restricted from doing all kinds of things), and for the special sacrifice to be made on that particular Sabbath. If true, this resolves the supposed chronological problems between John and the synoptics without having to appeal two different calendars being in use (one by John) and other by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, for which there is scant evidence.¹

That this was a special Sabbath heightens the sense of urgency in removing the three bodies (Jesus’ and the two insurrectionists crucified on either side) from their respective crosses *before* sundown Friday. The Romans often left the bodies of notorious people on the cross to rot—the more gruesome the scene, the greater the deterrent against further insurrection. Often times, however, the victims of crucifixion lived for days, but if the soldiers had no particular reason to prolong the person’s agony, they would break the victim’s legs and the crucified would quickly die.

The Jews, on the other hand, did not allow the bodies of their own to remain on crosses after dark. As we have seen, the law prohibits this in Deuteronomy 21:22-23. *“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.”* The Jews appealed to Pilate that all three bodies should be removed, which was especially important with the Passover celebration extending into the next day, the special Sabbath.

Pilate granted their request. *“So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.”* The two men crucified with Jesus were still alive, until their legs were broken, but Jesus, (as John has told us) was already dead. Jesus’ died sooner than most victims of crucifixion, perhaps because he was treated especially harshly and flogged twice, but also, no doubt, because of the horrible burden he carried as he hung on the tree—the wrath of his Father. No human could endure the burden which Jesus carried that day. Jesus’ suffering lasted several hours.

John’s account should forever put to death the so-called “swoon theory,” long championed by skeptics and liberal Protestant theologians. This view holds that Jesus didn’t really die on the cross, but went into

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 622.

shock, and after being taken from the cross and placed in the coolness of the tomb, revived, and then showed himself “alive.” In other words, the resurrection was faked. The Romans (who were very good at crucifying people) wanted to make sure that this very thing didn’t happen, so they made sure that Jesus was truly dead. As we read in verse 34, “*but one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.*” This was no mere poke in the ribs to see if Jesus would flinch, but the spear went in deep enough that it pierced Jesus’ pericardial sac, which, after his death, filled with watery blood and bodily fluids from the trauma Jesus endured from the flogging and while on the cross.

An extensive study of this appeared in 1986 in the Journal of the American Medical Association, in which the author (a forensic pathologist) contributed an essay in which he contends that the separation of blood and water is compelling evidence that Jesus was truly dead,² and that John’s account accurately reflects the historical reality of the terrible things Jesus endured at the hands of the Romans to secure for us our salvation. In the prologue of his Gospel, John has already told us that the word became flesh, for us, and in our place to save us from our sins. So, the many heretics throughout the centuries who attempt to argue the “Spirit” (or the divine nature) left the man Jesus, when he died, are exposed as the heresies that they are. Jesus—the God-man—died upon the cross, and John’s account offers sufficient proof. In Acts 20:28, Luke tells the elders of the church, to “*pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*” God does not have blood—he is Spirit. But the God-man does, and he shed that blood on the afternoon of the Passover very likely in the first week of April of AD 30, or 33.³

John thinks this is such an important point that he swears to it in verse 35. “*He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.* John had been among the witnesses of Jesus’ death. John saw Jesus die. John saw the Roman soldiers break the legs of the two other crucified men. John saw the soldier pierce Jesus’ side. John saw that Jesus did not respond in pain when stabbed, and that water and blood gushed from the wound. From the time of Chrysostom—a fourth/fifth century church father—many have speculated that it was at this point that we were saved by “the water and the blood” which supposedly prefigure baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

It is not the blood and the water coming from Jesus’ side which saves us—as though the blood and water are more than signs and seals of the reality they signify. It is the death Jesus died—bearing the guilt of our sins imputed to him—which saves us, of which the water and blood pouring from Jesus’ side is the proof that Jesus has, in fact, died for us. The shedding of blood points us to the reality and efficacy of the sacrifice which has just been made, and does not indicate that Jesus’ blood (which was human enough that it was Rh typable) has some sort of magical power which washes away sins. We can sing of a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel’s veins because the death which Jesus died is a sacrifice which satisfies the holy justice of God who is too holy to even look upon sin. The death of Jesus is that sacrifice which saves. The blood which flows from Jesus side is the visible proof that satisfaction has been made. And because it has, John now appeals to everyone who reads or hears this gospel that the time has come to believe in Jesus. John bears solemn witness to the truth and meaning of Jesus’ death.

Not only is John’s witness true, even in the act of stabbing Jesus in the side, Old Testament prophecy is being fulfilled. In verses 36-37 John tells us, “*for these things took place that the Scripture might be*

² Cited in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 623.

³ <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/04/april-3-ad-33>

fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken.' And again another Scripture says, 'They will look on him whom they have pierced.'” The fact that Jesus was crucified by the Romans and that Jesus was not put to death by stoning (as the Jews would have done) is certainly in John’s mind. Furthermore, because Jesus died before the Roman soldiers decided to knock off for the day, this spared Jesus from having his legs broken—which would have been contrary to several Old Testament passages which foretell of the Messiah and the manner of his death.

The first Old Testament prophecy to which John appeals is Exodus 12:46 (part of our Old Testament lesson) which reads, that the Passover lamb “*shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones.*” John sees the death of Jesus as the fulfillment of everything to which the Passover had pointed. The lamb’s bones are not to be broken when the Passover is celebrated. Jesus’ bones have not been broken, because he is the true Passover lamb—a theme we find elsewhere in the New Testament. Peter tells us that we are redeemed “*with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot*” (1 Peter 1:19). Paul speaks of Jesus as “*our Passover lamb, [who] has been sacrificed*” (1 Corinthians 5:7). This is why, when we assemble as the people of God on the Lord’s Day, we do not kill an animal as a sacrifice, nor do we re-sacrifice Christ’s body as in the Mass, but instead, we trust in and proclaim (as the good news of the gospel) that the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, our Passover lamb who will save us from our sins.

There is a rich Old Testament background here. In Psalm 34:20, the Psalmist tells us of God’s protection of the righteous man (the coming Messiah), “*He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.*” Jesus alone is that righteous man. John also cites from Zechariah 12:10. “*And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.*” When the prophet Zechariah speaks of “me, whom they have pierced,” he is quoting the words of YHWH, speaking of his act of striking down the beloved shepherd on behalf of his sheep.

Remarkably, and in light of these Old Testament texts, here stand the people of Israel—in fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy—looking on the one whom they have caused to be pierced. According to the prophet, Jesus was crucified because it was YHWH’s will. And yet, it is the people of Israel who have brought this terrible, yet wonderful day about. Once again, John sets God’s will and human rebellion side by side, affirms that both are true, and makes no attempt to resolve the matter.

It is also important to consider that in Zechariah’s prophecy, the weeping of those who witness the spectacle of this day is also tied to the day of YHWH’s final judgment, which the readers of John, likely realize is that day in which Jesus will return at the end of the age to raise the dead, judge all people, and make all things new. John’s point is that one day, those same people who have rejected the Messiah and put him to death, will weep bitterly because of what they have done. In fact, on the last day, all of the world’s unbelieving inhabitants will weep.

But there is still much to be done so that Jesus can be buried before sundown. John recounts that “*after these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was 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 away his body.*” Mentioned in all four gospels, Matthew tells us Joseph was wealthy (Matthew 27:57) while Mark adds that he was “*a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God.*” No doubt, Jesus had many secret followers at this point who feared greatly that what Pilate and Caiaphas had done to Jesus might be done to them. Joseph of Arimathea shows great courage

by going to Pilate and making arrangements to have Jesus' body given a proper Jewish burial. While the Romans often refused to give the dead to their families (especially if they had been found guilty of sedition) as Jesus had been, it took someone with sufficient political influence to make the request for the body, so that Pilate would seriously consider it.

For all we know, Pilate may have wanted Jesus buried quickly because this might put to rest some of the controversy Jesus had generated, and there were these nasty rumors floating around that Jesus predicted he would rise again from the dead. As for the Pharisaical understanding of Jewish law, since the body of someone like Jesus was considered ceremonially unclean, he must be buried, but if he were buried in the family tomb, the tomb would be desecrated. The two criminals would be buried in a common grave (a potter's field), but Joseph, knowing how the Sanhedrin would feel about his act, nevertheless approaches Pilate, who grants his request. It is Joseph, together with another member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus, who ensure that Jesus be buried not in a common grave, but in a newly hewn tomb in a nearby garden.

We first met Nicodemus back in John 3. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, and while he approached Jesus privately at night to ask him questions, and although he spoke up in Jesus' defense when Jesus came to Jerusalem during the Feast of Booths (John 7:50-52), John never does call Nicodemus a believer, even if his actions imply that this may be the case. In verse 39, John tells us that "*Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.*" So, at least two members of the Sanhedrin now identify publically with Jesus, making sure that Jesus's body was not buried improperly, but according to Jewish law. After Jesus' resurrection, many more of Jerusalem's leading citizens will come to believe in him.

As John tells us in verse 40, "*so they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.*" The spices were packed around the body, which was then wrapped with linen. This was done because of bodily decay and the resulting odor. It was customary for the bodies to be placed on a shelf in the front of a tomb (often a cave-like room carved into rock), which was later be moved to the back of the tomb with the other remains when the period of mourning was over. Since it was now well after three o'clock, it was remarkable that both a suitable tomb could be found, and the large amount of spices procured since it was Passover and since the Sabbath drew near. Without the clout of people like Joseph and Nicodemus, Jesus would not have gotten such a proper burial. Even with their collective clout, things were still rushed.

In the closing verse of chapter 19, John tells us that "*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 because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.*" John gives us few details, but Mark tells us that Joseph "*rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.*" Because the women participated in the preparation of Jesus' body for burial, they knew in which tomb Jesus was buried. The argument that the disciples went to the wrong tomb (which just happened to be empty), which explains why they mistakenly thought that Jesus had been raised, simply will not fly. And as John points out, the fact that the tomb was new and that no one had been buried in it yet, meant that the Jews could not argue that burying Jesus there would have desecrated the remains of others. But the fact that only Jesus would be buried in that tomb prepares the reader for the glorious news yet to come on Sunday morning.

And so John's account of Jesus' death and burial ends with Jesus in the tomb, dead and buried. Jesus' suffering was finished. But as the Psalmist writes in the 16th Psalm (v. 10), "*you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.*" Jesus' soul-spirit has returned to the Father while his

body lay in the tomb. By virtue of the fact that Jesus' body was buried, awaiting the resurrection, Jesus sanctifies the graves of all of those who have died in Christ (a wonderful comfort for those of us who have buried those whom we have loved, who will be raised with us on the last day). By virtue of the fact that Jesus has consumed the entire cup of wrath and obeyed the will of the Father perfectly, Paul can say of Jesus in Philippians 2 , *“being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

We shall see this glory openly displayed when Jesus conquers death and the grave on Easter Sunday, the day of new creation and our hope of eternal life. Jesus must rise again so that the Scripture might be fulfilled.