

Saturday's Sorrow

John 19:38-42

Introduction

I would like to invite your attention to the gospel, or good news, as recorded by John, in chapter 19.

On the way to school one day, my children and I got into a deep discussion. It started with missing certain people who were now in heaven. Their Grandpa Gladney was mentioned. One of my kids knew someone in school who had never even met any of his grandparents on either side. They marveled awhile at how bad that would be. Then one of my kids asked me, "Dad, were you an obedient child growing up?"

This had to be a trick question! If I said, "No, son, I was a rotten kid" – I would be giving him license to sin. If I said, "I sure was an obedient child growing up!" – they could check with their grandma later and find out that I was lying.

Frankly, I did not know how that question related to death. But, while I was sitting there driving, weighing my answer, so that I neither lied nor gave him freedom to disobey, he chimed in, "Because, Daddy, we wouldn't have to worry about you dying if you were obedient, 'cause the Bible says, 'Honor thy father and mother, so shall thy days be prolonged on the earth'."

If I die young, I am going to have some explaining to do later. It is tough having a preacher for a father, but it is a lot tougher having a preacher for a son! So, I changed the subject.

My kids are learning what most of us have already learned – life does not last. Death is a scheduled event in every one of our calendars – we just have not been told the date or the time.

I have observed, not only in my extended family, but also in my spiritual family, that death is always something of a surprise. It does not matter how old or how sick, it is an invasion that comes all too swiftly. And, no matter how much time you thought you had with that loved one, there are always things left undone and unsaid. You will never be completely prepared for someone's death. And, perhaps the greatest lingering pain, related to death, are the haunting memories of love unspoken and not shown.

I read about a father, who, with irritation, brushed his young son away from him. He was tired, overworked, and hungry. His son had come into the living room to deliver fifty birthday kisses, only to be told to go play. He did, and an hour later, while riding his bicycle, he was struck by a car and killed.

One writer wrote these powerful words,

We so often leave our tributes until people are dead. But you must know that one flower in life is worth all the wreaths in the world in death; one word of love and praise and thanks in life is worth all the eulogies in the world, when life is gone.

This morning, I am going to introduce to you two men. Two men, haunted by their failure to publicly acknowledge Jesus Christ – until Christ hung dead, on the cross.

On a practical level, their story should challenge us to profess our love for each other and, most importantly, to acknowledge and profess our love and devotion to Jesus Christ.

Final Captions from Calvary

Before we meet these men, let us first work our way from the site of the crucifixion down to the garden, where two men have made funeral arrangements.

Pilate's Order Ignored

Look in the gospel by John, at chapter 19, verse 31. There are a few things I want you to see, before we attend the funeral.

The Jews therefore, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), . . .

You may remember, from a former study, my analysis that Christ was crucified on Thursday. This high Sabbath, or special Passover Sabbath, fell on Friday, and the normal Saturday Sabbath was the next day. This would allow for Christ to be in the grave for a portion of three days and three nights.

Continue to verses 32 through 33.

The soldiers therefore came, and broke the legs of the first man, and of the other man who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs

Pilate has issued the orders. The breaking of the legs of the condemned would cause them to slip off the sedulum, or seat on the cross, and to be unable to push themselves up to gasp another breath of air. This would cause suffocation to occur and the victim would die.

This was unlike the normal Roman crucifixion. Normally the victim was left alone to slowly die. Some lived for weeks – suffering in the heat of the day and in the cold at night; tortured by thirst and hunger. Many times the victims were not even buried – they were simply taken down from the cross and left for wild animals. It is likely that the hill, which we call Calvary, was littered with bones.

The Law of the Jews was different, however, as recorded in Deuteronomy, chapter 21, verses 22 through 23a,

. . . if a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day . . .

Because of this command, the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of Israel, actually made available a grave for those who had suffered the death penalty and had nowhere to be buried.

So, the order is given to break their legs. What is interesting is that the soldiers took matters into their own hands and treated Jesus in a way that was incredibly exceptional. Verses 32 and 33 say that they broke the legs of the two criminals, *but* when they came to Jesus and saw that He was dead, they did not break His legs. The point is, it was not their duty to determine whether the men were dead – they were not doctors, they were soldiers.

Jesus' Side Pierced

Now, what did these soldiers do? The details are not given, so we can only surmise that they watched Him for breathing, took note of his color, then looked at each other and said, "He's already dead."

Then, perhaps one of the soldiers said, "Let's make sure." – and as verse 34 tells us,

but one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water.

A Roman spear was thrust, literally, into the heart of Christ. If He was not dead before, now He was.

John's compelling argument

Now, just in case there would be any wondering why these hardened Roman soldiers would disobey direct orders from their commander in chief, John records why Jesus was pierced instead of crushed, in verse 35.

For these things came to pass, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, "Not a bone of Him shall be broken."

What was so important about not having any broken bones? Because the Passover lamb, killed and eaten by the Jews as a reminder of their deliverance from bondage, was not to be broken apart. No bones were to be broken, nor was the body of the lamb to be divided in any way.

Jesus Christ was *The* Passover Lamb. He would be consumed as the final sacrifice, that would once for all deliver His people from bondage to sin. And, like all the other lambs before Him, He would not

experience the breaking of any bones. It was another way of picturing Him as The Lamb!

Verse 37 tells us, as well,

And again another Scripture says, “They shall look on Him whom they pierced.”

In other words, one day Christ will be recognized and vindicated as the Sovereign

Jesus was God in literal flesh

Medical accounts talk of a ruptured heart. Under incredible pressure, both physical and emotional, the heart can rupture. When that happens, the blood of the heart mingles with the fluid of the pericardium, which surrounds the heart. The spear of the soldier pierced the pericardium, and the blood and water issued forth. Imagine, in the literal sense of the physical term, none of His bones were broken, but His heart was.

Now, when John was writing this gospel, there was already a heresy, called gnosticism, that said that Jesus did not have a real body of flesh and blood and that He was not really a man. John’s graphic account of the death of Christ, including a reference to real water and real blood issuing forth, was an open slam – Jesus was a real man with a real body.

God had come, literally, in the flesh!

Jesus experienced literal death

Furthermore, John makes it very clear that Jesus was dead. Reports were also circulating, and are still believed by some today, that Jesus did not really die. This is called the “swoon theory” – that Jesus merely passed out. Then, with His bodily functions reduced to a bare minimum, He was buried, and, in the cool of the tomb, He revived. There was no death, hence there was no resurrection.

John the apostle says, “Read my lips – Jesus died!” Look at verse 35.

And he who has seen has borne witness and his witness is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe.

Believe what? John’s compelling argument is so that there would be no doubt that Jesus was God, in literal flesh, and that Jesus experienced literal death. If this is not the truth, then our faith is in vain. Oh

yes, there must be a literal, physical resurrection, but there must also be a literal, physical death.

First Glimpses at Graveside

Now, in a highly unusual turn of events, we are introduced to two men at the graveside.

Two men emerge from “hiding”

- The first man is Joseph. Look at verse 38.
And after these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. He came therefore, and took away His body.
- The second man is Nicodemus. Continue to verse 39.

And Nicodemus came also, who had first come to Him by night; bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight.

Joseph and Nicodemus are two men we do not know much about. However, we do know they were rich, influential, and prominent, and both were members of the Sanhedrin.

Every time John mentions Nicodemus, he refers to the fact that Nicodemus was the one who came to Jesus by night. He was afraid of being seen – yet a believer?!

There are a number of references to Joseph.

He is called, by Mark’s gospel, in chapter 15, verse 43a,

. . . a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting on the kingdom of God . . .

Luke calls him, in chapter 23, verse 50b,

. . . a good and righteous man

Matthew tells us, in chapter 27, verse 57b, that he,

. . . had also become a disciple of Jesus.

Luke even informs us, in chapter 23, verse 51a, that Joseph,

. . . had not consented to [the Council’s] plan and action . . .

One of the most insightful verses that no doubt refers to Joseph, Nicodemus, and others, is found in John, chapter 12, verses 42 and 43.

Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

Peter was not the only one denying Jesus hours before. Here are two members of the Sanhedrin, and apparently others, who are silent!

They would sit in their council seats and watch an innocent man, the God-man, be tried on “trumped up” charges and ultimately, crucified – yet, say nothing. But, and this may shock you a little, I think they should have remained silent! Why? Because they were not willing to back up, with their lives, what they might have said with their lips.

They lived for the approval of men; they lived for the applause on earth. Do not ever expect to receive the applause of heaven, as long as earth’s applause is more important. You cannot have both!!

I came home from a meeting, late one evening recently, and my wife was watching the Grammy awards ceremony. She had wanted to see a Christian artist, who was supposedly going to sing. She had wanted to hear what he had to say and sing, since millions of people would hear a potential testimony for the Lord. We never did hear him.

When I walked in, they were introducing a singing group that had just come on stage to sing their hit song – a pop love song that had been nominated for an award. In the space of two minutes, the guys in this group proceeded to harmonize their way through unbelievably vulgar lyrics. So, you might ask, “Why didn’t you turn it off?”

That is what my wife asked, but I wanted to talk back to it for a minute. I like doing that. Some of my best sermons have been delivered to something that cannot hear me or talk back!

“Honey, can you believe that? Did you hear that? Listen to that perversion.”

I was sounding just like my Father! Halfway through their number, I turned the TV off, in disgust, and went to the kitchen for a late night snack – something good for me; something glazed that sells by the dozen. My curiosity was peaked though, so, after a couple of minutes, I turned the television back on.

The group won the Grammy – for that filthy song! They came strutting onto the stage, and, would you believe, the first man to speak said, “I just want to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for getting us here.”?

Then, another man chimes in, “Thank you, Jesus!”

Have you ever prayed for lightning to strike?

If they really wanted to do the Lord a service, they would never have mentioned His name; never have associated that filthy song with His holy name. And that goes for any of you, whose life contradicts your lips. Some of you are living in such a way that it would be best for you to keep quiet – and do not tell anyone where you go to church.

Here, in John, chapter 19, is the story of two men whose belief in Christ was the world’s best kept secret – and rightly so!

Now, however, something astounding happens. Return to that passage.

As cowardly as these men were earlier, now their cowardice has turned into courage. You need to recognize that Joseph and Nicodemus had planned their activities down to the last detail. It would have taken time to locate and purchase nearly a hundred pounds of costly spices during the Passover. And who would carry this heavy weight to the grave? And, notice that Joseph is waiting for the right moment to ask Pilate for permission to take the body. Mark records these words, in chapter 15, verse 43b.

. . . and [Joseph] gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.

They had also carefully calculated the cost. Any time you publicly declare allegiance to Christ, there is a cost – somewhere, somehow.

Observations of Joseph and Nicodemus

Let me make some observations outside of this text. Follow me, for a moment, and I will show you why the actions of Joseph and Nicodemus took great courage.

They were willing to invite scorn and rejection

1. First, they were willing to invite scorn and rejection.

Make no mistake, as soon as the body of Jesus is requested from Pilate, the religious world would be scandalized; turned on its ear. This is front page news, “Members of Sanhedrin Side with Criminal” or “Turncoats in the Supreme Court”.

The public feelings of shock would have turned to a mixture of anger and disbelief, as Joseph and Nicodemus give Jesus a King’s burial. Look at verses 39 through 40.

And Nicodemus came also, who had first come to Him by night; bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. And so they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

These spices represented a man’s fortune. Do you remember Mary pouring a liquid form of similar spices from a jar onto the Savior’s feet? Judas complained, having estimated that it was worth an entire year’s wages. Well, Judas should have been here to estimate the price of this. It was not some small jar, but nearly one hundred pounds. This could very well be his life’s savings. Imagine the foolishness of spending costly spices on a condemned madman, a false Messiah, “Nicodemus has gone crazy! Nicodemus, you’re a fool!”

When you win the applause of heaven, you lose the applause of earth!

Now, in Palestine, bodies were buried in natural caves, or tombs, that were carved out of the limestone. Niches, or shelves, were prepared, where the bodies could be laid. The tomb was usually a family tomb and the shelves could be reused as necessary. The bones of the previous relative would simply be collected and placed in a bone box, or “ossuary,” that would remain in the tomb.

Matthew, in chapter 27, verse 60, tells us that the tomb belonged to Joseph. It was brand new. Some conjecture that Joseph had it hastily carved for Jesus alone. We do not know for certain.

Now notice, John, chapter 19, verses 41 and 42.

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. Therefore on account of the Jewish day of preparation, because the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

They were willing to experience defilement

2. Let me make a second observation. These men were willing, not only to experience ridicule and scorn, but to experience defilement.

When these two men touched Christ’s dead body, they were both immediately unclean; they were ceremonially defiled. The Law would require a day of separation and cleansing. Do you know what this means? They would miss the Passover meal scheduled for the high Sabbath – the meal that every Jew considered a sacred duty and honor. The greatest festival in Jewish culture would be missed. They would be unable to kill the lamb and, with their families, eat the lamb together as a remembrance of past deliverance.

But, if you tell Nicodemus, Joseph, and all the other Christians reading this gospel during the first century, “You have missed the Passover celebration; you have no lamb to remind you of past deliverance,” they will answer, “What difference does it make? We have found future deliverance. We have discovered the Lamb of God.”

In other words, “Do you consider us defiled?! God’s Son has cleansed us from every sin!”

They were willing to unite with a ruined cause

3. Finally, and most incredible to me as I studied these men, they were willing to unite with a ruined cause.

Now hold on! You and I know what is going to happen in three days – they do not.

- We know all about Sunday’s resurrection – they only know about a fresh tomb and a weekend of tears, confusion, and guilt.
- We are Sunday’s children – they are living through Saturday’s sorrow.
- We have united with Him in His resurrection – they have united with Him in His tomb.

Jesus is dead! And for all they know, He will remain dead!

The surprise later, among the disciples, makes it clear that Nicodemus and Joseph believed they would never see Jesus alive again. But, it is in that context that they openly confess their love for Him. That is incredible!

Can you see these men, washing the blood caked body of Jesus? Quietly they work together, just the

two of them, in the quiet of that limestone tomb. They mix spices into the folds of the linen strips and they wind them around Jesus' body, turning His body from side to side. Then, they reach His neck and they wash His face, perhaps once more, and they gently comb His matted hair. I would imagine that hot tears fell onto the Savior's face and onto the linen graveclothes. Perhaps they stopped periodically to embrace one another and sob. Each man carried a heavy burden of guilt, and graveyards always magnify guilt.

One man wrote these powerful words,

It should be remembered they buried a dead Christ. They did not know the Lord would rise again. As far as they knew they had lost their opportunity of falling at His feet to confess their love to Him. Ashamed of former failures, they now broadcast to the nation that they cared enough to do for Jesus something which even the disciples had not thought of doing. They would see to His funeral . . . they would bury Him like a King!

In order for us to understand the power of this moment and the application of this paragraph, we have to recognize the tragedy of missed opportunity.

You may never graduate from high school or college; you may never live to see your children grow up; you may never hold a grandchild; you may never change neighborhoods or switch careers; and the testimony that you have right now, may be the only testimony you will ever have. The witness that you are right now, in your world, may be all you will ever be.

I do not believe, for a moment, that Nicodemus and Joseph could have imagined, two weeks earlier, that Jesus would be dead. Just hours earlier, the nation was singing "Hosanna" to Him. Time moved so quickly – perhaps they were thinking of declaring

their loyalty, maybe that very weekend, but now, He is dead.

Can you sense the finality in the words of John, chapter 19, verse 42?

Therefore on account of the Jewish day of preparation, because the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Period. It is over. The opportunity is lost!

What are you counting on? What are you waiting for?

Lessons from Joseph and Nicodemus

What do Joseph and Nicodemus teach us? Let me give you several lessons that we can learn from them.

1. First, acknowledge Jesus Christ today – it may be the only day you have.
2. Secondly, keep short accounts with those you love. Sir, when was the last time you told your wife, or children, that you loved them? When was the last time your parents heard words like that, if ever? Some, quite practically, need to make some phone calls today.
3. Finally, any courage invested in introducing your world to Christ will never be wasted, nor regretted.

We never hear of Joseph and Nicodemus again. The book of Acts is silent and the Epistles are silent. But John's story of their lives would become an incredible encouragement to Christians, then and now, all around the world, who are struggling with the same issues.

Even if you have failed to speak for Him in the past, it is not too late to speak for Him now – while you still have breath and life. Live for Him today!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/5/1995 by Stephen Davey.

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