

At the Foot of the Cross
John 19:17-27
 Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom,²⁴ so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says,

"They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots."

So the soldiers did these things, ²⁵ but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

- John 19:16b – 27, ESV

Introduction: The Ultimate Irony of the Cross

Irony. In 1995, Alanis Morissette had a hit song singing about irony –

*An old man turned ninety-eight
 He won the lottery and died the next day
 It's a black fly in your Chardonnay
 It's a death row pardon two minutes too late
 Isn't it ironic, don't you think*

*It's like rain on your wedding day
 It's a free ride when you've already paid
 It's the good advice that you just didn't take
 Who would've thought, it figures*

Irony is the disconnect between what's expected and what happens instead. You can have verbal irony, where someone says something intending one thing but the real meaning of their words is something very different. One of my favorite examples of verbal irony in literature is from Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. When he first sees Elizabeth Bennet, he comments that she is "tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me." Little does he know how much he'll come to love Lizzy!

Situational irony is more like the events in Alanis Morissette's hit song, although many of those are just bad luck or Murphy's Law at work. In John's Gospel, he often highlights both verbal and situational irony to emphasize the reality

that God is in control. Things are so different from what anyone involved in the situation intended, and yet they are exactly as God intended them. Earlier, in Chapter 11, Caiaphas the high priest said, “It is better for one man to die on behalf of the nation,” which he meant as a calculating bit of dirty politics, but which God arranged for him to say as a prophecy. The same is true of the words of Pontius Pilate we looked at last week: “Behold the man!” and “Behold your king!” Pilate meant them as mockery, but they were in fact deep and profound truths.

John uses irony so often because he is drawing our attention to the central importance of the cross. All four Gospel writers want our focus drawn to the cross, but John is committed to highlighting an unexpected aspect of the cross: The scandal of the cross is the ultimate irony of the universe.

- In being raised up on a Roman cross, Jesus is entering His hour of glory, when he draws all people to Himself.
- In being unjustly condemned by a cowardly Roman governor, Jesus satisfies justice for all of God’s people.
- By allowing Satan to enter the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus to His death, God was ensuring Satan’s final defeat. As Satan nailed Jesus to the cross, the nails that pierced the heels of the Savior crushed Satan’s skull, just as God Himself had warned Satan would happen thousands of years earlier in the Garden of Eden.
- By laying down His life, Jesus secures the way to eternal life for all of God’s people.
- By entering death, Jesus defeated death.
- By becoming sin, Jesus destroyed the power of sin.
- The only way to glory was through the shameful and painful humiliation of the cross.

That is the ultimate irony, and that is a salvation only God could orchestrate!

Let’s see how John unfolds it in this powerful passage. Our passage today takes us to the foot of the cross. I’m afraid most of us have a very inaccurate mental image of the cross. We envision crucified people as hanging high in the air and the bystanders looking up high at them. In reality, Roman crucifixion took place at ground level, basically. The feet of crucified men were on a small platform just above the ground, so those who stood at the foot of the cross were basically eye-to-eye with the crucified as they died:

I. The Inscription, vv. 17-22

So they took Jesus, ¹⁷ and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. ¹⁹ Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek.²¹ So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” ²² Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”

First of all, Jesus is taken and sent out, carrying His own cross. Why is He forced to carry His own cross? For the Romans, having a condemned man carry his own cross accomplished two things: First, it added to the emotional and mental anguish, as he was publicly paraded in humiliation and forced to carry the instrument of his own torture and demise, utterly breaking his spirit. Secondly, it would help to further exhaust him to make death come more quickly. Breathing on a cross is very painful and exhausting, as you must raise yourself up by pulling on the nails driven through your wrists, and so exhausting the victim made this even more difficult and would hasten death, which usually came by suffocation.

Yet God had another purpose: Almost two thousand years earlier, Abraham had led his son, Isaac, on a journey in these same hills, and Isaac had carried the wood for the sacrifice on his back. God wanted to make this connection clear, so His people would know what was happening. God spared Isaac, and spared Abraham from having to sacrifice Isaac. When God intervened with the ram in the thicket to be a substitute for Isaac, we read, “*Abraham called the name*

of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” A more literal translation of this verse (Gen 22:14) is “Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will see to it”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD He shall be seen.” Now, God was fulfilling the promise of this place, and Jesus carried the wood of the sacrifice to make sure people would see the connection and understand what God was providing.

Secondly, notice that Jesus is brought out to a place called Golgotha or “The Place of the Skull.” John is the only Gospel writer to give us the name of all three places where Jesus is – Gethsemane, Gabbatha, and Golgotha. As much as some people may not like alliteration, John seems to be clearly using it in his Gospel, to show the sovereignty of God, even over the places where Jesus agonizes (Gethsemane means “olive press”), the place where He is condemned (Gabbatha means “exalted place”) and the place where He dies (Golgotha means “Place of the Skull”). Jesus agonizes for us, is condemned for us, and dies for us, and the Lord selects each place specifically. Why “Place of the Skull”? Three leading theories are that the outcropping of rock looked like a skull, that the place was where David buried the skull of Goliath, and that it is where Adam’s skull was buried. We don’t know the answer for sure, but it was clearly a place associated with death, and any of those three explanations would be rich with powerful symbolism.

John then calls our attention to the inscription Pilate had made to identify Jesus as He was being crucified: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” The chief priests – Annas and Caiaphas – object to this, but Pilate says, “What I have written I have written.” This seems to show that Pilate believed Jesus’ claims about Himself. This is a sobering warning for those who are intellectually persuaded that Jesus is who He says He is but who don’t have faith in Him. Believing that Jesus is the King of the Jews, even believing that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of sinners is NOT the same thing as believing in Jesus as YOUR king and trusting in Jesus as the Son of God to save YOU! Let Pilate’s persuasion be a warning to you if that is where you stand this morning!

II. The Soldiers, vv. 23-24

From Pilate and the Chief Priests, John turns our attention to the soldiers at the foot of the cross –

²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom,²⁴ so they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.” This was to fulfill the Scripture which says,

“They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.”

So the soldiers did these things

While the chief priests and Pilate are bickering over the wording of the sign identifying Jesus, the soldiers are bickering over Jesus’ clothes. Jesus had five articles of clothing, and the four soldiers who crucified him were permitted to take his clothing. This was part of the pay for serving on crucifixion duty, the crucifying Roman soldiers got to divide the clothes of the victims. They would be soaked with blood, of course, but that could be cleaned, and clothes were a very valuable commodity in the ancient world. So, they divided up the clothing, each getting one piece of Jesus’ outfit. That left the tunic, the inner garment, which was in one piece. Rather than tear it up and ruin the value, they gambled for it.

For a moment, just think about this. These soldiers stripped Jesus naked, nailed Him to a cross, mocking Him all the time, and then, as Jesus was struggling to breathe and was dying in humiliating agony, they were dividing up His clothes and even gambling for His underwear. “So the soldiers did these things” is John’s way of emphasizing how shocking their behavior is.

And yet as shocking and disgusting as their behavior is, it is exactly as God foretold it through David in Psalm 22 1000 years before this scene unfolded. Matthew and Mark both tell us that Jesus cried out the opening line of Psalm 22 from the cross: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

Here, John quotes from later in Psalm 22, where David writes this:

*I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
15 my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
16 For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet —
17 I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
18 they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots. – vv. 14-18*

This is a poignant and powerful portrayal of the cross, written by the 28th great-grandfather of Jesus over 1,000 years before He hung on the cross.

God is in control of every detail. This is what He wants us to see. First of all, we need to see that our salvation is perfect and complete, not the smallest detail was overlooked. But then also, we are to see that every detail of our lives is also under God’s precise sovereign supervision. Of course, trusting God with the details of our lives doesn’t mean things will be easy. God was sovereign over the minutest details of Jesus’ death, and it was utterly horrible and humiliating. It was the hardest death anyone has ever been called to endure, but not an ounce of the suffering was meaningless or wasted. God’s sovereignty didn’t remove the hardship, but it ensured that it would be for good.

When we trust God with our lives, it doesn’t mean we won’t suffer. It just means that we trust Him to be good even in our suffering, which is never meaningless or wasted.

III. The Women, vv. 25-27

Alongside the bickering high priests and gambling soldiers stands Jesus’ mother and His aunt and two other women who loved Him and supported Him:

but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” 27 Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

Matthew 27:55 tells us of “many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him.” John names four of them: his mother (Mary), his mother’s sister (probably Salome), Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. We believe that Mary’s sister, Salome, is the woman identified in Matthew 27:56 as “the mother of Zebedee’s sons.” This means Jesus was the first cousin of James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Mary, the wife of Clopas, is probably the woman identified in Matthew as “Mary, the mother of James and Joses.” So, these three women are the moms. The moms are standing faithfully at the foot of the cross when almost all of the disciples have fled. All except John.

One of the most remarkable things about Jesus on the cross is how, in His extreme agony, He is still caring for others. From the cross, He cries out to God on behalf of the soldiers gambling for His clothes, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” He also ministers to the thief on His right, and in response to the believing plea of this thief, Jesus reassures him, “*This day, you will be with Me in paradise.*”

And here, in a loving act of consideration, He takes care of His mom. He addresses her as “*Woman,*” the same way He addressed her at the Wedding at Cana in Galilee. This should show us that Mary does not have special status or access to Jesus as “the mother of God.” She is a disciple, and He relates to her here, in love, as one of His disciples.

Why would Jesus entrust the care of His mom to John? What about Mary’s younger sons? Why wouldn’t they take her in? At this point, the younger sons of Mary and Joseph are unbelievers. They had tried to get Jesus to quit the ministry and come back home. They had opposed Him throughout His earthly ministry. John is a faithful disciple, and it was better for Mary to go to John’s house, where her faith would not be undermined. She is saved by faith in her Son, just as every other disciple. And so Jesus lovingly provides for Mary’s spiritual needs as well as her physical needs. She is a widow who needs someone to care for her, and she is a disciple who needs her faith nurtured, especially now, when she is hurting so deeply.

The Incredible Compassion of our Savior

When we zoom in on the details at the foot of the cross, what do we see?

1. We see human evil, from bickering chief priests, to an intellectually convinced but unconverted cowardly Pilate, to callous soldiers gambling for a dying man’s clothing.
2. We see a sovereign God supervising every small detail to fulfill every word He has spoken and ensure the glorious perfection of our salvation. God’s sovereignty is not thwarted by the sinfulness of men; He works through it.
3. Yet above all, we see the incredible compassion of our Savior:
 - a. He is stripped naked and exposed, so that our sinful shame may be covered by His perfect righteousness.
 - b. He is suffering agony, so we may be healed.
 - c. He is abandoned, so we may be adopted and loved.
 - d. He is condemned, so we may be justified.
 - e. He is cursed, so we may be blessed.
 - f. He is bleeding, so His blood can cleanse our sin.
 - g. He is mocked, so we can be comforted and encouraged.
 - h. He is being swallowed by death, that death may be swallowed up in His victory.

And while He is suffering intense agony – physical agony, mental anguish, emotional turmoil, and spiritual terror – He is loving those around Him. He is praying for the soldiers, extending comfort and hope to the thief, and caring for the needs of His mother. The incredible compassion of our dying Savior should both comfort us, as we consider how much He loves us. Remember what John 13 said about why He did this – “Having loved His own, He loved them to the end.”

It should also challenge us in those times when we are tempted to feel sorry for ourselves and withhold love from others in our suffering. May the love of our compassionate Savior flow through us to those around us who need Him – even if they are thieves or callous gambling soldiers.