

1. Scorned but guiltless

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[0 : 00] Well do be seated friends and let's bow our heads together and we'll pray. What a wonderful thing it is that we can pray to a God whose ear is open to those who turn to him and come to him in the name of Christ.

And as the hymn writer has expressed it, grace and love like mighty rivers poured incessant from above and heaven's peace and perfect justice kissed a guilty world in love.

Our dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for these words from William Rees and we thank you for his understanding of the peace of heaven and the justice of heaven being brought together in the event of the cross of Jesus.

We thank you so much dear Father that you have expressed your justice at the cross in punishing the sin of mankind when it was, as it were, strapped upon the very body of Jesus.

Indeed as Paul the Apostle has put it, he became sin. He who knew no sin became sin for us. And we think of your justice expressed as our sin was taken by the Lord Jesus representing us there.

[1 : 35] And our sin was indeed punished and justice has been done. And we thank you that it was your love for the world and your desire to bring peace between yourself and guilty mankind that you went to such great lengths.

And our dear Father, as we think today and in these coming weeks here on Wednesdays about the cross of Jesus and the teaching about it from John the Evangelist, we do ask you to open our minds afresh to understand more because there is so much that we still have to understand and to learn.

But we pray too that you will open our hearts to hear your word so that we are moved to respond in faith and love and repentance and gratitude. So dear Father, please bless us today.

Whatever cares and concerns are upon our hearts, please dear Father, take care of them and give us wisdom in dealing with them. And open our ears, we pray, to your word and my mouth to speak it so that we may understand you and know you more truly.

And we ask it through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Amen. Well, perhaps you'd turn with me, friends, if you have a Bible, to John's Gospel, chapter 19.

[2 : 58] And you'll find that on page 905 in our Visitor's Bibles. Some of you will have been here a few months ago, I think it was February, when I was working my way through the 18th chapter of John's Gospel.

And I thought that for this month of June, I'm due to be here for the Wednesdays of June, I thought we would work our way through, God willing, chapter 19 as well. And this chapter is the chapter that records both the crucifixion and the burial of Jesus.

So let me read the first 16 verses. They're really today, we'll look at the first 11 verses, but I'll read a little bit further to give us a bit more context of the story. So John chapter 19, verse 1.

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe.

They came up to him saying, Hail, King of the Jews! And struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, See, I'm bringing him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in him.

[4 : 10] So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, Behold the man!

When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, Crucify him! Crucify him! Pilate said to them, Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.

The Jews answered him, We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die, because he's made himself the son of God. When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid.

He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, Where are you from? But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, You will not speak to me.

Do not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you. Jesus answered him, You would have no authority over me at all, unless it had been given you from above.

[5 : 17] Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin. From then on, Pilate sought to release him. But the Jews cried out, If you release this man, you're not Caesar's friend.

Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar. So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called the Stone Pavement and in Aramaic, Gabbatha.

Now it was the day of preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, Behold your king. They cried out, Away with him!

Away with him! Crucify him! Pilate said to them, Should I crucify your king? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar.

So he delivered him over to them to be crucified. Amen. May this word of God be indeed the word of God to us today. Now let me say a couple of things first by way of introducing chapter 19 before we get into the text here of this opening part of it.

[6 : 29] The first thing is this. Jesus, as you know, was crucified on a Friday. And we always call this Friday, Good Friday. And it's rather startling when you think of it that we should call it Good Friday when you think of these events concerned which were so utterly vicious and horrible.

Look at the very opening verse here in chapter 19, verse 1. Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. Or as the authorised version puts it, scourged him.

A Roman flogging or scourging. Well, there were different types of Roman flogging. But so often it was such a brutal whipping or beating that a man could die under it before he ever got to be crucified.

What would happen would be that you'd have a team of soldiers armed with whips of some kind and they would lay into a man's back, possibly his front as well, until the bones were beginning to come out and the insides being forced out.

That's the kind of event that is being talked about here in verse 1. I won't say any more about the physical details. And yet, we don't call this Friday Bad Friday or Terrible Friday.

[7 : 38] We call it Good Friday. And there are good reasons for calling it Good Friday. And I hope that these reasons will emerge as we read this chapter over the coming weeks. John chapter 19 is right at the heart of the good news, the gospel, despite the unbearable violence and cruelty that it records.

But then secondly, let's also bear in mind that these horrible events recorded by the Apostle John are central to what God had long before planned and purposed.

The death of Jesus was no accident or mistake. Yes, at one level, it was the most wicked crime that the human race has ever committed to kill the son of our creator in cold blood.

But at another level, it was the very thing that Jesus came for. He was born to die. In fact, in his own words, he came to give his life as a ransom for many.

So as we read the terrible story of John 19, we mustn't think that at this stage in the story, God had lost control of the universe. Or that Jesus had suddenly become like Samson, shorn of his strength and rendered incapable.

[8 : 53] Not at all. Listen to Jesus' own words spoken back in John chapter 10. No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again. So who's in charge? Not Pontius Pilate, not the Jewish high priests, not the devil.

Jesus himself is the master of these events. Nothing catches him off guard. Or listen to the words of Simon Peter on the day of Pentecost.

This is from Acts chapter 2, spoken just a few weeks after the crucifixion. Peter's talking about Jesus and he says, This Jesus delivered up, that means delivered up to death, according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

You crucified by the hands of lawless men, but God raised him up. Isn't that a striking phrase that Peter used? The definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

[9 : 56] It was that that lay behind the events of that Friday. And that's again why we can call it Good Friday. It was all part of God working his purpose out. So our reading of John chapter 19 is

going to take us to a place of barbarity and ferocity.

The gospel must take us there eventually. But let's never forget that we're thinking about Good Friday and that John the Evangelist is bringing us good news. Even that terrible verse 1 is part of the good news.

Now what is John, the author, wanting us to notice? What is he wanting to point out to us? Let me mention four things in particular. First, let's notice the mocking contempt of the Roman soldiers. Now this is not the most important aspect of the story by any means, but it's there and I think John wants us to see it. And it helps us to have a feeling of what Jesus was facing, what he had to endure.

You'll see that in verse 2, the Roman soldiers make a crown of thorns. They get these thorns together and twist them and then push them down onto Jesus' head. And then they take a purple robe and they drape it round him.

[11:06] Now remember, he's just been scourged at this point, so he probably found it very painful to walk or even to stand. This is really an adult form of the mentality of the playground bully.

The soldiers have heard that Jesus is being called or nicknamed the King of the Jews. Perhaps they'd even been present in the final part of chapter 18 when Pilate is discussing with Jesus if he's a king.

So they thought it would be rather amusing to tease him brutally and dress him up as a mock king wearing a crown and regal purple. And then you see in verse 3, they approach him and mockingly call out, Hail King of the Jews!

Then they strike him with their hands. It's what a conquering race does to the race they've conquered. It's in the nature of a conquering army to vilify and belittle enemy soldiers.

And if they can catch their king or their leader, what sport they're going to have with him. Of course, the soldiers had no idea who they were dealing with at all. They'd crucified plenty of men before now, and this one was merely one of three that they were going to crucify on this particular Friday.

[12:16] So these soldiers were men who'd been brutalized by life in the Roman army. And mocking this young Jew gave vent to their brutality and also to their anti-Semitism.

Now, thank God, not all the Roman soldiers despised the Jews. The New Testament records accounts of Roman centurions, senior soldiers who respected both the Jews and the God of Israel. But there's the first thing that John is showing us, the mocking contempt that the Roman soldiers express towards Jesus. You might say, brutalized humanity, despising the finest and the truest of all human beings.

Then second, John wants us to notice Pilate's weak inconsistency. The key to understanding Pontius Pilate's behavior is to see that he was pulled, torn, you might say, in two directions at once. On the one hand, Pilate wants to stamp on anything that might lead to rioting in the streets of Jerusalem. His job, after all, is to rule the province of Judea, to keep a very firm hand upon the Jews, who, after all, have a bit of a history of not happily bowing their necks to the yoke of an overlord.

[13:31] The thing that would have kept Pontius Pilate awake some nights was the fear of Jewish insurrection. So when these Jewish priests and leaders come to him, fiercely insisting that Jesus must be put to death, he is inclined to bow to their demand, because saying no to them might be a high-risk policy, might bring riots.

But on the other hand, and here's how Pilate is torn in the other direction, his conscience seems to be not entirely hardened. Now, Pilate was known to be a particularly cruel and unscrupulous man, but not entirely unscrupulous.

It is striking to see in the accounts here how Pilate three times tells the Jews that he thinks Jesus is innocent. Look with me first at chapter 18, verse 38, at the end of the verse there.

He went outside to the Jews and told them, I find no guilt in him. And then on to chapter 19, verse 4. I'm bringing him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in him.

And again, verse 6, towards the end of the verse, I find no guilt in him. So Pilate is not a man whose conscience has been entirely cauterized.

[14:45] Yes, he's a corrupt man, but he's still trying to administer justice with justice. He doesn't understand Jesus at all. And yet Pilate is clearly impressed by the shining integrity of this prisoner, impressed enough to know that he is innocent.

And curiously, it's because he knows he's innocent that Pilate has Jesus flogged. Let's pick it up again from the end of chapter 18. You see how Pilate tells the Jews in verse 38, I find no guilt in him.

Implication, therefore I ought to release him. And at that moment, Pilate plays what he thinks is a particularly strong card. He remembers the Jewish custom that every Passover, the governor of Judea magnanimously releases one Jewish prisoner back to the Jews as a token of goodwill to try to build up happy relationships between the Romans and the Jews.

So Pilate thinks to himself, I'll offer them Jesus to go free as my annual Passover act of kindness. The Jews may burble in their beards at me, but they'll be glad that I've remembered to be kind to them.

But the plan badly backfires on Pontius Pilate. He simply hasn't reckoned on the fierceness of their hatred for Jesus. So they cry out, when he makes this offer, they cry out, not this man, but Barabbas.

[16:06] So Pilate then thinks, because he still wants to release Jesus, he thinks, well if I give Jesus a severe beating or flogging, that surely will be enough to satisfy the Jews. I'll then be able to set him free, which is what he deserves.

But I'll have done enough to appease their anger. So Pilate's decision to have Jesus flogged actually arises out of his conviction that Jesus is innocent. And Pilate is still trying to release Jesus when he utters his famous words in verse 5.

Just look at verse 5. Jesus staggers out of Pilate's house into public view, no doubt looking terrible, cut to pieces, covered in blood and sweat after the flogging.

This crown of thorns jammed on his head and this mock regal cloak draped around him. And Pilate says to the angry Jews, just look at the fellow, look at the man.

How can you possibly think that this beaten up wretch is a threat to your Jewish way of life? See sense, fellows, and lay off him. But that ploy doesn't work either.

[17:09] Because as soon as the chief priests see Jesus, they don't cry out, OK Mr. Governor, we'll back off, he's had enough punishment. Quite the opposite. They press forward and they shout, crucify him, crucify him.

There's only one thing that's going to satisfy them. And Pilate is beginning to realise this now. But even at verse 12, you'll see that Pilate is still trying to release Jesus. It's not until we get to verse 16 that he finally submits to the will of the priests and hands Jesus over for crucifixion.

So while we have to say finally that Pilate is weak, not prepared to stand up for what he knows is right, I think we should at least credit him with trying to do the right thing, albeit in a very wrong way. And as for those words of his in verse 5, behold the man, I guess really he said there far more than he knew or realised. He meant, look at the poor wretch, what threat is he?

Lay off him. But John surely means us to understand much more. This is the man. Look at this man. The second Adam, bloodied but unbowed.

[18:19] The true man in whom humanity itself finds its meaning. Look at him and put your faith in him. Remember how John the Baptist at the beginning said, behold the Lamb of God.

Here is John the Evangelist telling us to look at this man and as we look and believe, we shall live. Now thirdly, John wants us to notice the murderous hostility of the Jewish leaders.

It was not enough for them to see Jesus flogged and then ridiculed. Nothing less than his death was going to satisfy them. If Jesus had been exiled to Patagonia or Greenland, it wouldn't have satisfied them.

Do you remember back in John chapter 11, just after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, the chief priests got together jealous because so many people were going after Jesus, following him. And John the Evangelist writes in chapter 11, verse 53, from that day on, they made plans to put Jesus to death. That was their stated ambition at this stage.

[19:26] Now from their point of view, the point of view of the priests themselves, they felt surely that they were standing up for Judaism, for the faith of Abraham and Moses. The main bone they had to pick with Jesus was over his claim to be the Son of God.

There were other things about him that they hated, like his apparent disregard for the laws of the Sabbath, but it was his teaching about who he was that finally set them implacably against him. And it comes out here in chapter 19, verse 7. The Jews answer, Pilate, who's just said, I find him not guilty. The Jews answer him, we have a law and according to that law he ought to die because

he has made himself the Son of God.

That was the real thing, that was the issue. The same thing comes out in Mark's Gospel as he tells the same part of the story. Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? Asks the high priest of Jesus.

I am, says Jesus, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven. At which the high priest tore his garments and said, what further witnesses do we need?

[20 : 33] You've heard his blasphemy. What is your decision? And they all condemned him as deserving death. But John's Gospel, perhaps more poignantly than the other three Gospels, brings out how sad all this is.

You'll remember that famous verse back in chapter 1 where John says, he came to his own people but his own people did not receive him. In other words, here was Jesus, born a Jew, the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament prophesies.

And he came to his own people. But by and large, his own people despised him and rejected him and the leaders of the Jews were the ones who pressed for his execution and got their way finally. And yet, even this murderous hostility of the Jews was not outside the boundaries of God's purpose. Remember, this is Good Friday, not the Friday when lawlessness triumphed.

The Bible consistently portrays God as being never the author of evil and yet as always sovereignly redirecting evil deeds so as to further his good purposes.

[21 : 44] And nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Men could not recognize the Son of God and they set out to destroy him.

But the very thing that they achieved in their fierceness, namely the crucifixion, proved to be in God's good purpose the means of eternal rescue for all who repent and believe.

Evil men meant it for evil but God turned the tables and used it for good as he is always pleased to do. So friends, we've seen the contempt of the Roman soldiers, the weakness of Pilate, the fierce hostility of the Jewish leaders and let's notice fourth, the calm determination of Jesus himself.

At this stage in the story he simply allows it all to happen to him. He has settled it in his mind that he must go through with this and so he allows them to flog him and to mock him and finally to crucify him without retaliating.

As Simon Peter puts it in his first letter, when he was reviled he did not revile in return. When he suffered he did not threaten but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

[23 : 07] Now that's exactly what we see here. He endures it all calmly. He says virtually nothing apart from the words in verse 11 which show how deeply he's trusting his Father in heaven.

He's calmly determined. Why? Because he too knows that this Friday is Good Friday and that his sufferings and his death will be the ransom price for many people.

He bears the suffering because he knows about the enormous good fruit and benefit which is going to come from it. Well how should we respond to this account of John?

Let me suggest briefly three ways in which it's good for us to respond. First of all with sorrow. It's a wonderful thing to be a human being.

You and I are an extraordinary combination of body, mind and soul. We have immense capacities and we know this and when our capacities are well directed they bring great joy and pleasure to ourselves and to other people.

[24 : 15] But there's a snake in the grass. There's a principle in each one of us of rebellion against God. A profound desire in each of us by nature to dethrone God and to enthrone ourselves.

And this principle of sin, because that's what it is, this is the reason why Jesus had to die for us. Our sins and our sin have put up an almost insuperable barrier between us and God and only the death of Jesus could remove that barrier.

So it's right that all Christians should carry in our hearts always a sense of sorrow, because our hostility to God necessitated the death of his wonderful son.

The hymn writer said, we may not know, we cannot tell what pains he had to bear. Indeed, we shall never know how much it cost him, but we can be sorry that it cost him so much.

Secondly, let's respond with humility. The world's way, our own natural way, is always to applaud ourselves, to puff ourselves up and our reputations, and other people's reputations as well.

[25 : 30] Really, our way is to say, glory to man in the highest, or even glory to me in the highest. But the events of Good Friday humble us as nothing else can.

They show us our sin, but friends, they also show us our worth, our value, in the sight of God. It would have been plain justice on the part of God simply to reject us all forever.

We couldn't have complained if God had consigned all of us to the cosmic dustbin, cast out of his presence forever. But it's because he has valued us and loved us so deeply that he was prepared to give up his son to death, so that we might spend eternity with him, not far from him, not absent from him.

Isn't that deeply humbling? That people as wretched and undeserving as you and I should be valued so deeply. The cross of Jesus shows us what we're made of, but it also shows us what Jesus is made of, and that is he's filled with undeserved love towards fallen men and women. And then third, let's respond with joyful gratitude. The Bible teaches us gratitude. It's one of the great lessons of the Bible. In fact, gratitude is one of the great hallmarks of the Christian life. [26 : 52] and nothing will draw gratitude out of our hearts quite so much as the crucifixion of Jesus. We're going to thank God for all sorts of things, for the creation in all its beauty and wonder.

There are a few places quite as beautiful as Scotland in the early summer, are there? Even on a day like this. And we thank God too for sustaining our life in so many ways, with food and rain and sunshine and friends.

we thank God greatly for the church and for the Bible. But the willingness of Jesus to die on the cross for us, that is the thing that will call forth the greatest gratitude from our hearts.

So let me ask, as if I was just speaking to you as an individual, just the two of us together, let me ask you this question. Have you ever purposefully and consciously thanked Jesus for laying down his life in your place?

Have you ever said to him something like this? Thank you, Lord Jesus, for deciding to go to Jerusalem, for being willing to be humiliated and jeered at, for putting yourself knowingly in harm's way, for allowing men to flog you, to deride you, to strike you, and then to nail you through wrist and ankle to a cross.

[28 : 13] Thank you, Lord Jesus, for bearing the dreadful punishment that my sins deserve. So that I should not have to bear it myself, so that I should be free and forgiven. Have you ever thanked him like that?

Many of you, I know, will have done so, and often we know that his suffering was the price of our forgiveness. But if you've never thanked the Lord Jesus up to now, will you do that today?

It's the right way to respond to what he's done for us. Well, I'm going to say nothing more. I'm not going to close with a spoken prayer, but let's have a quiet moment when we can bow our heads together and each of us pray as we would like to for a moment.

and keep aside...

and he's Thank you.