

Golgotha: Mary's witness to the Cross

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[0 : 00] Well, now we turn to our reading from the Gospel of John. You'll find it there in your service sheets, or if you have a Bible, it's in John chapter 19.

Pilate delivered Jesus over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, and he went out bearing his own cross to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.

And there they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side and Jesus between them.

Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross.

It read, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. 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.

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 the King of the Jews. Pilate answered, What I have written, I have written.

[1 : 13] 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.

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. But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, Woman, behold your son. And he said to the disciple, Behold your mother. And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said to fulfill the scripture, I thirst.

[2 : 18] A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, It is finished.

And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. 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.

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, but one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear.

And at once there came out blood and water. 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.

For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled. None of his bones will be broken.

And again, another scripture says, They will look on him whom they have pierced.

[3 : 36] Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, perhaps you would have the passage from John's Gospel that's in our sheets in front of you.

As we look together at Golgotha, at Mary's witness to the cross, let me begin by a question. Why did Jesus Christ die on the cross on Good Friday?

That's a very, very important question. Indeed, it's the question at the center of the whole Christian faith. But sadly, it's a question that many people, even within what professes to be the Christian church, many people are very confused, and sometimes worse than confused, about that question. Last week, I watched a YouTube video from a parish church in Edinburgh, where the preacher gave a sermon entitled, Christ did not die for our sins. And he told the congregation, and of course the whole World Wide Web, a number of things.

First, that Jesus' death was not God's doing, just purely the Romans. Second, that the Gospels know nothing about Jesus' death being a ransom for sins or a sacrifice for sins.

[4 : 52] Thirdly, that in any case, the sacrifices in the Old Testament never had anything whatsoever to do with sin. By this stage, I was really quite incredulous.

But fourthly, he said that the idea of Christ's atonement for sin is the biggest hindrance to evangelism in the world today.

Well, these kind of things may be promulgated by the sort of programs on television that we see that reinterpret history as if it was, you know, Dan Brown novels that we ought to believe, rather than thousands of years of attested historical evidence from verifiable sources.

They might be proclaimed also, sadly, by people wearing dog collars and flowing robes. That's usually a sign and a giveaway, by the way, if you listen to Jesus. Don't listen to people who wear flowing robes.

That's what he said. But friends, it doesn't matter who is saying it or where they're saying it. That is simply not the Christian faith.

[5 : 55] In fact, a greater twisting, a greater perversion of what the Bible actually teaches about what eyewitnesses to these things were so confident of, in terms of the veracity of their testimony, that they would rather die than recant their testimony to these things.

You could hardly find a greater perversion. So this Easter, I want to take us right back to the evidence, the primary evidence from some of the oldest, most reliable, most verifiable historical documents anywhere about anything in this whole world, and that is the Gospels.

Certainly the critical evidence upon which the whole of the Christian faith stands or falls. John's Gospel is a book that is packed full of evidence. It's first-hand testimony from witnesses to the words and works of the historical Jesus Christ.

Repeatedly, John puts his own reputation on the line, publicly claiming what he saw, what he witnessed was true and was incontrovertible.

And of course, when he wrote, many could have controverted it, should it have been found to be untrue. He tells us at the end of his Gospel, in John chapter 20, that his purpose in writing is that these things, out of the multitude of things he could have recorded of Jesus' life, these things are written that you may believe that the Christ, the King, the Son of God, is this Jesus, this man who died and who rose again from the dead, just as he promised he would do.

[7 : 34] These things are written so that you may believe, says John, and have life in his name. See, the stakes are very, very high.

The claim of the Gospel writer is very great. He is claiming that in this Jesus, and in Jesus alone, is the answer to the great human problem, the problem of our mortality, which is death.

And Jesus was very clear. I am the way and the truth and the life. No one, he said, no one comes to the Father but by me.

And in that context, he's talking of the Father's house in glory, the kingdom of everlasting life. No one comes there but by me. And when Jesus said those words to his followers in the upper room just before Good Friday, he told them that he was about to go and prepare a place there for them through what he was going to do, through his coming death and all that that would accomplish. Because he knew that his death was the long-appointed sacrifice for sin, that he was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

[8 : 50] That's what John the Baptist proclaimed him at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Let me urge you, by the way, if you never have, to read right through John's gospel for yourself from beginning to end.

It won't take you long. There's little copies here which are at the doors and we'd love to give you one if you haven't read it. Judge for yourself what the primary evidence really does say about what Jesus himself said his life and death was all about.

And make sure that if you are rejecting the Christian faith, which you are free to do, make sure you are rejecting what it really claims to be. Not some grotesque parody perpetrated by, well, by often the religious establishment which since the time of Jesus has largely been really hostile to the truth about Jesus Christ.

Take the gospel and read it for yourself and make your own judgment. But today I just want to show you from this one little section that we read together of John's gospel how absolutely clear we can be about what the gospel themselves, never mind the rest of the New Testament, just the gospels,

how they understand and proclaim the cross of Jesus and what it's all about. And we're focusing especially today and on Easter Sunday on the testimony of Mary Magdalene. Mary appears for the very first time in John's gospel in chapter 19 here. [10:16] And we only ever see Mary Magdalene at the cross at Golgotha and then in the garden in chapter 20. So she's here in the gospel above all, first and foremost, as a first-hand witness, both to the death of Christ and to his resurrection.

Of course, Mary wasn't alone. If you look at verse 25 there, you'll see at least three other women are named and John himself, the beloved disciple. Why does John explicitly note that? Well, of course, he is acutely conscious that he is being a witness, that he's giving evidence to something of monumental importance, not just the fact of Jesus' death, but its exact circumstances and therefore also interpreting its meaning for us.

So he wants no doubt at all about the veracity. Look at verse 35. He who saw it has borne witness. That's John himself. His testimony is true. He knows he is telling the truth.

It's like swearing in before a judge at the court. I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. That's what he's saying. So what did Mary and these other witnesses, what did they really witness about how Jesus died and what he himself said on the cross and the extraordinary events that surrounded him on the cross?

[11:37] Let me just highlight three things that John makes a point of highlighting, I think, very clearly in this portion of Scripture in the way he writes it for us.

Things that he has written and explained so that we may believe based on true and trustworthy evidence from real witnesses, from honest people like Mary and these others.

First, Mary and these others witnessed a death that was foretold by the Scriptures. That Jesus' death was a consistently revealed plan of God.

Any idea that for the Gospel writers the death of Jesus was an accident, a tragedy, it simply cannot be squared even with this one little passage that we've got in front of us today.

Never mind the rest of the New Testament. Never mind the rest of the whole Bible. Just look at how often John explicitly tells us that the manner of Jesus' death fulfilled what had been foretold in the Scriptures.

[12:45] Verse 24, this was to fulfill the Scripture. Verse 28, to fulfill the Scripture. Twice in verse 36, that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.

And as another Scripture says, do you see? It's unmissably explicit in case we're so utterly dull that we can't see it. But in fact, it's far more than just that because it's actually implicit also in so many of the things that John tells us which any first century Jew who knew the Old Testament like the back of his hand which they all did, any Jew would immediately pick up on.

Look, for example, in the first paragraph of what we're told about the inscription above Jesus in verses 19 to 22 that proclaimed to the whole world in the three languages that would cover everybody, Jesus is King of the Jews.

of course, a first reason for putting that there for Pilate was the usual one, Rome asserting its authority, making a statement, don't oppose Rome or this will be your fate as well.

Of course, there's also Pilate's contempt for the Jews. We see that in his response to them. Pilate was getting his revenge on them because of the discomfort that he'd had to face by being used by the Jews.

[14:08] That's why he wanted to humiliate them and taunt them. Here is your king and he wouldn't take it down. But above all, you see, John is telling us this because he is saying all of this just simply serves God's plan.

That his true king should be proclaimed not just to the Jews but to the whole world. In John chapter 12, a little earlier in the story, when Jesus entered Jerusalem and all the crowds were shouting, Hosanna, welcome to the king.

Immediately, John tells us that some Greeks, some Gentiles then came seeking Jesus. And it was then immediately that Jesus declares, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to myself.

And here is Jesus lifted up on the cross and proclaimed king to the whole wide world. Israel's king proclaimed in the languages of the world to the people of the world.

Now the Psalms, if you read them, are full of that kind of language. Say among the nations, the Lord is king. Or Isaiah's great prophecy that Jesus quotes so often about himself, speaks of God's

coming Messiah as not only raising up Israel but as being a light to all the nations that my salvation might reach to the ends of the earth.

[15 : 39] And this is how that's going to happen is what John is telling us here. As foretold in the scriptures constantly and consistently. Listen to Isaiah again.

He shall be high and lifted up and shall be exalted and he shall sprinkle many nations. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him when his soul makes an offering for sin.

I could go on and on but can you see that for John everything, everything about the death of Jesus was so consistently foretold by the scripture.

Even down to what happened to his clothes, verse 23. Divided by enemies just as as King David, his ancestor who then represented God's kingship over his people just as he was gloated over by enemies in his day.

See what we're seeing here friends is man's hatred, man's rejection of God's rule which is directed against anybody who stands for the rule of God over man.

[16 : 46] We see that hatred and rejection coming to its head, to its climax in man's rejection of the Son of God himself, the incarnate Christ.

That's why when you read through the Bible, when you read the Old Testament, you'll see that all of God's saviors, his prophets, his rescuers, his kings, whoever it is, his anointed one who represents God, every single one of them is opposed even by his own people because people can't abide the lordship, the rule of God over their sinful lives.

So how then when just like in Jesus' parable of the vineyard, when at last God sends his own Son to his rebellious subjects, how then will they react any differently?

It's all foretold in the Scriptures but it's all in the consistently expressed plan of God. It's not a mistake, it's not a failure, it's not a surprise.

Apostle Peter is just as clear, isn't he, on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. You crucified and killed Jesus by the hands of lawful men but he says you did it only according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

[18 : 09] And again in Acts 4 he says, Herod, yes, Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel gathered against Israel but only to do what your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Jesus died as foretold by Scripture according to the consistently expressed plan of God.

It wasn't a tragic accident. It wasn't a death with no real purpose. And nor was Jesus unwilling or nor did he resist in any way his death in his own part.

Because again what Mary and these others witnessed was a death willingly fulfilled by the Savior. Jesus' death was the consciously expressed purpose of Christ.

Never mind all that Jesus tells his disciples explicitly all through his ministry about the purpose of his coming and his will to bring glory to his Father in heaven.

[19 : 15] His desire and purpose to cast out the evil one to give his life as a ransom for many.

Never mind Jesus' unexplicit words back in John 12 where Jesus announced all this and John says he said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

He knew it was coming way before the disciples even understood anything. Never mind the huge weight of evidence all through the Gospels just these three little verses alone.

Verses 28 to 30 they're enough aren't they to tell us this plainly. First that Jesus acted in conscious fulfillment of the scriptures verse 28 knowing that all was now finished fulfilled and to fulfill the scripture he spoke he said I thirst again quoting from the Psalms from Psalm 22 probably and Psalm 69 Psalms about the suffering of God's anointed king consciously in his mind explicitly expressing what he thought was going on.

There's no question none whatsoever of the idea of Jesus somehow being forced unwittingly and unwillingly into death either by the Romans by man or indeed being forced into it by God the Father. He consciously purposes it. Every part of Jesus passion is not only in the Father's plan of redemption but a consequence of the Son's direct obedience to it.

[20 : 54] It's how one expert scholar expresses it. And it was this conscious purpose to fulfill the scriptures and to accomplish that plan that took Jesus to the cross.

That's what he came to do. And now he knows that his work is done, that it's finished, it's fulfilled, it's accomplished. That's all the same word that's highlighted there in bold, translated differently.

The scripture is fulfilled. Christ's work of salvation is fulfilled, it's accomplished. Jesus has consciously completed the plan of God and so verse 30 now he consciously gives up his life.

Do you remember what Jesus had said to his disciples? I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. No one takes it 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. This charge I have received from my father. And so verse 28 knowing that all was now fulfilled, finished, he said it is finished, it is accomplished and he bowed his head and he gave up his spirit.

[22 : 13] He laid down his own life. A death long promised according to the consistently revealed plan of God and fulfilled, finished according to the consciously expressed purpose of Christ.

Another hint of a vengeful father or an alienated son. This is a picture of utter sovereign harmony. For this reason the father loves me, Jesus had said back in John 10, because I lay down my life that I might take it up again.

And I do it, says Jesus, to open the door for my sheep, so that if anyone enters by me, he will be saved. I came that they might have life and have it abundantly.

Jesus spoke so often, so clearly, about what his purpose was in coming to die for his people. And again, right here at the cross, in what Mary and these others witnessed and saw, we see so clearly exactly what Jesus accomplished.

Because God's plan and Christ's purpose was that this be a death that frees through sacrifice. This death was a clearly explained Passover for the people of God.

[23 : 45] And that's what John's message is so clearly in these final verses, 31 to 37, where he brings both the circumstances and the scripture together with unmistakable clarity and forces us, forces us to see that the cross is the great Passover of all Passovers and the great redemption of all redemptions by the blood of the Passover Lamb.

Why did John bother to record these verses here? Well, first of all, of course, because he's giving accurate testimony of what really happened.

Verse 35, he who saw it has borne witness. He knows he's telling the truth. This is what really happened. And all the details ring absolutely true, don't they?

The Jewish law said that it was a disgrace for bodies to be displayed upon the Sabbath. This was a very special Sabbath in Passover week. So it must be done.

And John is also bearing witness to the fact, of course, that Jesus truly was dead. He had given up his life. He hadn't struggled to keep it to the last moment like these other criminals had done and had to have their legs broken to remove that last resistance.

[24 : 58] He was already dead. Roman soldiers, don't be naive about this, Roman soldiers knew a dead man when they saw one. And they also knew how to make absolutely sure by thrusting a spear right into the heart and the lungs.

So it is patently ridiculous to have any such idea that somehow Jesus survived the most violent method of execution the world has ever seen and revived himself and left a tomb.

So John is showing us the reality of it, but that is not all that John witnessed. Note again his deliberate appeal to Scripture, verses 36 and 37. He quotes the law from the book of Numbers and the prophets.

Zechariah. Why so? Well look at verse 31. He's reminding us deliberately that all of this is happening during the Passover.

Do you see? Good Friday was the great day of Passover week, the day of preparation, and that was no accident. John, like all the gospel writers, insists that this was deliberate.

[26 : 06] Back in John chapter 12, verse 1, we're told Jesus deliberately came towards Jerusalem, six days before the Passover. In the next chapter we're told again, just before the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father.

The meal in the upper room, everything, including Jesus' own explicit testimony, tells us that his death is the fulfillment, is the reality of all the symbolism that the Passover spoke of and promised would one day be accomplished in the great Passover.

When just as God redeemed his people once out of bondage in Egypt and saved them from the destroying angel of God's judgment by taking refuge under the blood of the Passover Lamb, so also at last he would redeem his people forever from the bondage of sin and death and hell through the blood of the Passover Lamb, whose blood shed would shelter against God's judgment against sin, whose blood would liberate into the glorious kingdom of life.

What did John the Baptist say right at the beginning of the gospel? Announcing Jesus to the world, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

What does the Apostle John, what does Mary Magdalene and all these others here witness at the cross? That Jesus was that Passover Lamb.

[27 : 50] That fulfilling the scriptures, verse 36, about every detail of the Passover Lamb. that he would be spotless and perfect. Numbers chapter 9, verse 12, that they should leave none of it till morning, nor break any of its bones.

Jesus' death was a death that freed his people from their bondage to sin and therefore to death. That's the testimony of the gospel here, it's the testimony of Jesus, it's the testimony of the whole New Testament.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Peter writes, you were ransomed not with perishable things like silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like of a lamb, without blemish.

Friends, if anything, anything, can be said unequivocally about how the gospel writers viewed Jesus' death, death, it was that they understood from the scriptures and from the incessant teaching of Jesus himself that his death was a Passover, a freeing, a redemption from sin and guilt and death, a freeing through sacrifice, through the blood that was shed of the Lamb of God himself. This is the blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins, is what Matthew records Jesus is saying. Then he shows us the disciples drinking that cup of liberation and then Jesus going out to Gethsemane and begging his father to take the cup of his wrath from him, but not my will but thine.

[29 : 47] The great exchange is at the very heart of everything the Bible tells us about what Jesus came to do so that his people might go free in that great Passover.

And John here notes the detail of the blood and the water, blood probably mingled with fluid from the lung cavity. And surely he means us to recall Jesus' words about his blood that cleanses from all sin, about the living water that would flow from him and become a fountain to eternal life for all who would believe in him.

And Zechariah's prophecy here in verse 37 which foretold the great mourning in Jerusalem when at last people realized that in piercing this man they had in fact pushed the sword of hatred into the heart of God the Father himself.

And the prophet immediately after those words goes on to say this, on that day there shall be a fountain open for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them of their sin and uncleanness.

Why did Jesus die on Good Friday? It's just another way of asking what is the true Christian gospel? and the answer, the unequivocal answer of the Christian faith, of the gospels, of the apostles, of Jesus Christ himself, of the whole Old Testament, the answer is this.

[31 : 28] In Paul's words to the Corinthians, the gospel I preach to you which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, is this.

That Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. That's what John's telling us. It was a death foretold by scripture, the consistently revealed plan of God.

A death fulfilled by the Savior, the consciously expressed purpose of Jesus Christ. And therefore, a death which frees through sacrifice, the clearly explained Passover for God's people.

And that is why. Only because it was a death according to plan and purpose, fulfilling God's promise, as a great Passover, as a great liberation from sin and death and hell.

That is why that terrible Friday, dark Friday, awful Friday, we today can call Good Friday, good and wonderful and blessed, only because it was a death for sin and for sinners.

[32 : 55] Because at the cross of Jesus, even though I be the chief of sinners, there is hope for me. Judged, condemned, and guilty, I am lost indeed, but the cross of Jesus meets my deepest need.

At the cross of Jesus, pardon is complete, love and justice mingle, truth and mercy meet. Though my sin condemns me, Jesus died instead.

And there is full forgiveness in the blood he shed. friends, I for one am grateful, so eternally grateful for what was witnessed by Mary that day at Golgotha, and what such witnesses have recorded and preserved and given to me so that I might know the truth about the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your son who so loved this world. You gave him as a Passover sacrifice that we might be set free.

Help us, we pray, to understand it and to take it in and to make this joy our own this Easter. For we ask it in Jesus' precious name.
[34 : 31] Amen.