

The Immortal Dies

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[0 : 0 0] We will turn to our Bibles now, and we're going to read together in John's Gospel, chapter 19. You'll find that, I think, in the Church Bibles on page 906, and Edward has been leading us through some studies in these chapters, 18 and 19, of John's Gospel.

And we come this morning to the final study, and to this extraordinary passage, really, where John speaks to us about the death and the burial of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So we're reading then from John, chapter 19, and at verse 28. After this, Jesus, knowing that all now was finished, said, to fulfill the Scripture, I thirst.

A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a full sponge 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.

[1 : 3 1] 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, they saw that he was already dead. They didn't 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. Not one of his bones will be broken. And again, another Scripture says, They will look on him whom they have pierced.

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. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds in weight.

[2 : 4 3] So they took the body of Jesus, bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. 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. So because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, friends, let's take our Bibles and turn to the 19th chapter of John's Gospel, which you'll find on page 906, if you have one of our hardback Bible copies.

And as Willie said earlier, we're finishing off this little series in John chapters 18 and 19 that we've been following in recent weeks. And the main section I want to concentrate on this morning is the final paragraph of John chapter 19, verses 38 to 42, which records the burial of Jesus.

Now we reach the high point of John chapter 19 at verse 30, where Jesus actually dies. And just before he dies, he cries out that great word, *tetelestai*, meaning it is finished or accomplished.

[4 : 07] The work is fulfilled. But you'll see that John, the evangelist, is not content to pass straight from the death of Jesus at chapter 19, verse 30, to his resurrection at the beginning of chapter 20.

He feels that he must tell us about the final hours of that Friday afternoon and evening after Jesus had died. Now the Apostles' Creed reflects exactly this concern.

You may remember the words of the Creed at this point as it speaks about Jesus. It says, he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

So the Creed doesn't move straight from the crucifixion to the resurrection. It insists that we think about and understand the fact that Jesus died and was buried. And John is telling us the story of his burial here with various comments and implications as he goes along.

John wants to tell us the facts of Jesus' burial because he wants us to know that Jesus really died. And we'll come back to that important point in a moment.

[5 : 21] Now before we look at the text itself, let's remind ourselves what the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are doing as they write up their account of the gospel of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

These four men, the evangelists, are not simply the objective recorders of historical facts. Now they do record historical facts, but they're much more than that.

They're teachers. Or you might say the facts that they record are not mere facts. They're facts with a message. These facts mean something.

And their meaning is crucially important. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are not unconcerned or aloof historians. They're evangelists. And they want to persuade us of their case.

Not so as to make us their disciples, but to bring us to believe in Jesus so that we should be his disciples and so that we should enjoy eternal life. The historical facts that the evangelists present us with are quite simply the most important things that have ever happened in the history of the human race.

[6 : 31] So John is saying to us, the readers, am I persuading you? Are you with me, friends? Do you accept what I'm saying? Are you prepared to believe what I'm telling you about Jesus?

Because if you do, you will have eternal life. John's method, let me remind you of this. I think we may have had this a few weeks ago, but let me remind you, it's so important to understand how John is writing up his gospel.

What he gives us is evidence based upon eyewitness testimony, evidence which leads to belief, which in turn leads to eternal life.

Evidence leads to belief, leads to life. That's the constant underlying structure of the way John presents his material. Now let's see how he does this here in our passage.

Look with me at chapter 19, verse 35. He who saw it has borne witness. Now he's talking here about himself. John, 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.

[7 : 39] I'm telling you the truth, I'm bearing witness so that you may believe. Or to put it simply, I'm telling you the truth, and I know it's true because I saw it with my own eyes. I'm passing on to you, I witness testimony so that you might become believers.

So look at that verse. What is it? What is this thing that he has seen that he writes about in verse 35 to which he's now bearing witness? Well, it's recorded there in verse 34 and it's rather odd.

What John saw was one of the Roman soldiers picking up a spear after Jesus had died and then piercing his side with the spear. And, here's the important thing, blood and water immediately flowed out of the incision which the spear had made.

Now, why does John imply in verse 35 that this flow of blood and water is so significant? So significant that it should help the reader to become a believer?

Now, let's remember that John was writing up all these events some 50 years after it happened, probably between the year 80 and the year 90 A.D.

[8 : 51] Now, in that latter end of the first century A.D., there were plenty of people around who were not willing to believe that Jesus was really a man. What they were teaching was that he appeared to be a man but he wasn't really a human being.

And their reasoning was this. They said, human flesh is part of the material world and the material world by definition is evil. So how could the pure Christ of God possibly inhabit an evil body?

So what they taught instead was that Jesus appeared to be a man but he wasn't truly a man. Now, John will not have this for a moment. To him, it's false teaching and he flatly denies it.

This is why he says right back at the beginning in his first chapter, the word became flesh, human flesh, and dwelt amongst us. The word incarnation means that Jesus became a real human being.

Like the rest of us, he had flesh and bones and blood and sweat. He got hungry. He got tired. He had to sleep just like any other human being. He was a real man.

[10 : 04] And this also explains why John begins his first letter in the New Testament in such a peculiar way. He writes this, that which was from the beginning, he's talking about Jesus, that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerning the word of life, the life was made manifest and we have seen it.

That's the same point that John is making there. he's refuting this false idea that Jesus was not truly a man. No, he's saying, of course he was a man. He is a man.

I've touched him. I've seen him. I've heard him. I know the evidence of my senses. Now come back to chapter 19 and verse 34. The soldier's spear goes into Jesus' side and out flow two elements which demonstrate that a real human being has really died.

That's John's point. Jesus was really human and he really died. Now why does the outflow of blood and water demonstrate this? Because it was widely believed in both the Jewish and Gentile cultures of the ancient world that the human body consists of blood and water.

Now I realize that modern physiology would regard that view as over simple. But modern medicine does confirm that if a body were to be pierced soon after death in the way that Jesus' body was pierced, the outflow would probably take the form of blood from the heart and a separate quantity of clear liquid which would have gathered after death in the pericardial sac.

[11 : 52] Now really, we need not get too anxious about the anatomical details. The important thing to see is that John's point is that Jesus really died. A real man has truly died and that, he is saying in verse 35, is a powerful reason for putting our trust in Jesus.

Now the final paragraph of the chapter, verses 38 to 42, is here to establish just the same point beyond a shadow of doubt. And John goes very carefully into the details.

So look with me at the verses. Joseph of Arimathea comes in verse 38 and he asks permission from Pontius Pilate, the governor, to take away, look at the words there, to take away the body of Jesus.

So Pilate gives him permission and, end of verse 38, he comes and he takes away his body. Then Nicodemus comes also in verse 39, bringing 75 pounds weight of myrrh and aloes.

So, verse 40, they took the body of Jesus. Do you see how three times John uses this word body, corpse?

[13 : 08] Then verse 41 tells us about the location of the tomb in the garden and verse 42 tells us that they had to bury Jesus' body in haste because the Sabbath was just about to begin.

The rule was that when the sun went down over the horizon, the Sabbath day begins. So you've got to do your burying activities before the Sabbath because you couldn't bury somebody on the Sabbath. So what is John's point?

This was a real death, there was a real body, and this body was really buried. So why is John so insistent that Jesus was a real man who really died?

Let me take those two points in order, his real humanity and his real death. Think first about his real humanity. John knows that only a real human being can represent the human race to God.

And Jesus came to die on the cross for our sins as our substitute and also as our representative. Now we know how the principle of representation works.

[14 : 17] Think of Parliament. We're all represented by an MSP in the Scottish Parliament and by an MP at Westminster. And that member of Parliament goes to the Parliament with our concerns, representing them.

He or she speaks for us, votes for us, acts as an advocate for the things that we think are important. But we can only be properly represented by a human being.

A hedgehog could not represent us in Parliament, could it? A poodle would not be a good representative for us. We might occasionally think that a poodle would do better than the person who does actually go to Parliament for us.

But the principle is clear. Human beings can only properly be represented by another human being. So if Jesus only appeared to be a man, but wasn't actually a human being, the gospel would be a sham.

Paul insists on this very strongly when he writes in 1 Timothy chapter 2. He says there is one God and there is one mediator between God and man, the man, Christ Jesus.

[15 : 24] And the word he uses there for man is a very strong word. It's the word anthropos. We get anthropology from it. What it means is a human being, not just a male man, but a human being. In fact, Jesus provides a two-way representation.

As God, he represents God's concerns and commands to the human race. And as a man, he represents man's plight and man's needs to God.

And it's such a comfort to us to know that our mediator truly understands what it is to be a human being. He knows our pressures and our stresses.

He knows our sufferings. He knows what it's like to struggle. He knows what it's like to be opposed fiercely by other people, to be battered by life. If during his time on earth he had merely appeared to be a man, but he wasn't actually a man, we would have to regard him as a golden angelic being who knew nothing of our tears and our pain.

But the Bible teaches us that he is a man of sorrows, that he's acquainted with grief. So it's a comfort to us to know that we're represented by somebody who knows from the inside what it means to live a truly human life.

- [16 : 45] Now let's turn secondly from his real humanity to his real death. This is what John is emphasizing. And of course the two things go hand in hand because if he wasn't a real human being he couldn't have died a real human death.
- But this teaching of John that he really died does raise questions. Some people have flatly denied that he died and some people still do.
- So for example the Quran the book of Islam says speaking of Jesus it says they did not kill him neither did they crucify him it only seemed to be so.
- So while Islam regards Jesus as a prophet and even reveres him as a prophet it's not the real and true Jesus that they revere. They've rewritten things they've reshaped him and thus they deny something which is at the heart of the true gospel.
- And yet even for Christians there's something here to fill us with wonder. Charles Wesley expresses it so well in his famous hymn when he writes this tis mystery all the immortal dies.
- [17 : 57] Now there you have the problem expressed very pithily. How can the immortal die? Well the answer to that question lies in understanding the two natures of Christ that he is both fully God and fully man.
- As God he cannot die. One of the fundamental characteristics of deity is immortality. Paul uses a great phrase in Romans chapter one when he speaks of the immortal God.
- As God Jesus cannot die but as man he could die and he did die. Let me quote his great words from 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.
- This charge this authority this authorization I've received from my father. So Jesus has the power the authority both to lay down his life to die truly and to take it up again.
- [19 : 03] No one takes my life from me. At the most important level therefore he was never at the mercy of men. Even when they were nailing him to the cross he was the master of the situation but he really died.
- Look again at John 19 verse 30. He said his head and gave up his spirit. Now the fact that Jesus really died has two very wonderful consequences for us and I'd like to explain them now.
- Here's the first. His real death demonstrates that he really bore God's punishment for our sins. At the heart of the gospel there is a great exchange and the exchange is this that Jesus' righteousness in the sight of God gets put to our account and our sinfulness in the sight of God gets put to Jesus' account.
- This is what the Bible means by Jesus bearing our sins or bearing the consequences of our sins. The whole foul weight of our sinfulness was as it were strapped upon Jesus' body as he went to the cross and on the cross he received the wages of sin.
- Our sin not his own and the wages of sin is death. Now the exchange takes place in that it was we who deserve death and should have been punished with death but Jesus changed places with us.
- [20 : 40] But there's a double exchange here. It's not simply that he took the consequences of our sin. It's equally true that God clothed us with Jesus' righteousness.
- It's nowhere in the Bible put better or more clearly than this. Paul the apostle in 2 Corinthians chapter 5. For our sake he that is God the father made him that is Jesus to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
- God made Jesus to be sin he knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. So he clothed in our sin dies for our sin and we clothed in his righteousness are accepted by God and forgiven.

Now we're getting to the point of why John wants us to understand that Jesus really did die. There are some people opponents of the gospel who have said this exchange you talk about is just a figment of people's imagination just a kind of wishful thinking people will say you're kidding yourselves you Christians to think that Jesus righteousness in the sight of God has been put to your account how can you possibly know that you are now regarded by God as righteous and forgiven well the answer is simple we can know it and we do know it because Jesus died demonstrates that our sin really was put to his account nothing else could have killed him so his real death demonstrates that his side of the exchange has truly taken place and that's why we can be sure that the other side of the exchange has also truly taken place namely that we who trust

Jesus have really had his righteousness put to our account in the sight of God if Jesus had not really died we could have no assurance that our sin had really been dealt with but his real death demonstrates that the wages of our sin have been truly paid and received and it's Jesus who has received those wages and not us so where does it leave the one who trusts in Jesus the answer is forgiven freed counted as righteous in God's sight that great burden of sin the penalty of sin truly and fully and permanently lifted off our shoulders this is why John is so insistent that we understand that Jesus really did die suffered under Pontius Pilate was crucified dead and buried in that great fact lies our assurance that our sins are forgiven isn't

[23 : 40] God kind and wonderful to have provided us with a savior like that but there's another reason for John insisting that Jesus really died and that is that if he were not truly dead he could not have been truly raised look at the final verses of chapter 19 here Joseph and Nicodemus go to Pilate they ask for the body of Jesus and then we can say they lovingly and reverently performed the Jewish burial rituals by the way just notice that it must have been very costly for them they had both been undercover secret disciples of Jesus Joseph as verse 38 tells us had been a secret disciple because he was frightened leaders and Nicodemus as verse 39 reminds us had initially sought Jesus out under cover of darkness he didn't want to be spotted and identified as somebody who was interested in the strange rabbi but here at this stage

Nicodemus provided 75 pounds weight of spices that must have cost him an arm and a leg and Joseph we find this out from Matthew's gospel Joseph laid Jesus in his own must have cost a pretty penny as well and even more so both of these men ran the gauntlet of approaching Pontius Pilate as a challenge for us here isn't there if we're tempted to be secretive or secret disciples but and this is really the point the chapter ends after all the shouting and the tumult and the horror of the three crucifixions it ends quietly on that evening in early April in a garden a burial ground and these two brave men gently laying the body of Jesus to rest it's almost as though John ends the chapter not with a full stop but with a dot dot dot dot because we then have a pregnant pause of 36 hours or so until that stupendous moment on the

Sunday morning when he burst forth from the tomb not merely revived or resuscitated but raised from the dead if there's no death there can be no resurrection but if there is a real death there is a real resurrection and the real resurrection of Jesus means that the power of death over the human race has been decisively broken the cobra's fangs have been drawn oh death where is your sting cries Paul the apostle now as I said a moment ago there's a pause it's like a pregnant pause at the end of chapter 19 just look at that final verse since the tomb was close at hand they laid Jesus there but as soon as we turn into chapter 20 we quickly realize that the story has taken a wonderful new turn John in chapter 20 is very understated but despite his restraint you sense a feeling of mounting excitement as he picks up the story let me read the first few verses of chapter 20 now on the first day of the week

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early while it was still dark and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb so she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple the one whom Jesus loved that's John's way of talking about himself and she said to them they have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him so Peter went out with the other disciple and they were going toward the tomb both of them were running together but the other disciple out ran Peter and reached the tomb first I think he was quite a bit younger and possibly weighed a bit less than Peter I guess that's the reason for he's fitter anyway stooping to look in he saw the linen cloths lying there but he did not go in then Simon Peter came following him and went into the tomb he saw the linen cloths lying there and the face cloth which had been on Jesus head not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself then the other disciple

John who had reached the tomb first also went in and he saw and believed for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead and they went back to their homes now friends what John is describing for us here is the emergence of the new world we're in a garden here and in verse 14 a man appears who is then mistaken for the gardener now think back to early Genesis in the old beginning the first beginning God created the heavens and the earth and he placed Adam as the gardener in the garden but in this new beginning a new gardener appears this is the last Adam this is the second man as Paul describes him in Colossians chapter 1 the firstborn from the dead John is recording here the beginning of the new creation and central to it is the

[29 : 04] Lord of the new world Jesus Christ who has broken the power of death Paul Paul Paul puts it like this in Romans chapter 6 Christ being raised from the dead will never die again death no longer has dominion over him here he is in the garden the conqueror of death it was back in the first garden the garden of Eden that God laid upon the human race the dreadful sentence of death and it's in this other garden in Jerusalem that that dreadful sentence has now been annulled now remember John's method here he's presenting us with his eyewitness testimony so that we should believe look back to chapter 19 verse 35 he who saw it eyewitness testimony he who saw it as born witness his testimony is true he knows he's telling the truth that you also may believe now look at chapter 20 verse 8 then the other disciple

John who had reached the tomb first also went in and he saw and believed so in chapter 19 verse 35 he's saying to us I saw with my own eyes the evidence that Jesus had died and here in chapter 20 verse 8 he's saying to us I also saw the evidence that Jesus had risen the blood and water spilling from his side was proof of his death and the folded grave clothes were now found there are some glorious entailments in all this it is plain historical fact that Jesus died and it's plain historical fact that he was raised from the dead but being a Christian entails much more than simply believing that these facts are true the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus become woven into the very fabric of our being if we're

Christians they define us they determine the very shape of our life and our identity Paul explains this in Romans chapter 6 that our baptism is a picture of our union with Jesus our union with him in his death his burial and his resurrection let me read three verses from Romans 6 this is Romans 6 verses 3 4 and 5 do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father we too might walk in newness of life for if we have been united with him in a death like his we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his I don't pretend to understand that last verse fully but

I'm quite certain that it's one of the most thrilling things ever to have been written by a human being to be a Christian is not simply to believe that Jesus died and that he rose again it is to be incorporated into his very person in his experience of death and burial and resurrection you remember in John's gospel earlier chapter 15 Jesus says to the disciples and this applies equally to us he says abide in me and I in you he's teaching us in those words that we have the capacity to take him into our very heart and soul and personality and equally that he has the capacity and the willingness to take us into his very heart and soul and personality John's phrase is that we abide in him Paul's parallel phrase is that we are united with him and Paul also teaches that the

Christian is in Christ the Christian is in Christ and Christ is in the Christian but Paul's great emphasis is that we are united with Christ in his death and his resurrection so what is this going to mean for us well think of his death first his real death if we are united with him in his death it means that we were on the cross with him in some wonderful way that we can't fully understand we were incorporated into the very fabric of his suffering body because of him and the fact that we are with him our sins have been paid for dealt with sin is no longer able to point an accusing finger at us so as to bring us down we no longer have any obligation to sin as if sin were still our master or our controller it means that when sin approaches us and holds before us some attractive temptation we can say to it be gone you're no longer my master

[34 : 13] I owe you nothing I belong to a new master the old relationship between sin and us in which it was our master and we were its slaves that relationship has now been broken by the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus is the other side of this wonderful provision of God because we are united with Jesus in his resurrection it means that at one level we have been already raised not physically of course not bodily but spiritually in terms of our future place in the world to come a place that we're already beginning to enjoy we already belong to the new world if we're Christians this is what it means to be born again we've been born into a whole new realm we have one foot in the grave physically but we have the other foot already in eternal life all this means that the death and resurrection of Jesus shape our self understanding and our identity in a way that nothing else can of course we have secondary points of identity our family name our family history our nationality our work our hobbies and interests and so on these all play a part in the way that we think of ourselves but the determining factor in the

Christian's life is the knowledge that we have died with Jesus and that we've been raised with him and it is this knowledge that will give us confidence and steadiness as we face the struggles of our lives and as we face the implications of our mortality let's bow our heads and let's thank God God our dear Father we thank you so much that you have not left us without comfort quite the contrary you've sent us a wonderful savior our savior who has died for us and has been raised for us in whom we now live and rejoice and we pray that this great gospel giving us steadiness and strength to live this life and to face our own mortality we pray that you will write it ever more deeply in our hearts filling us with joy and helping us also to pass it on to many others and we ask it in Jesus name amen