

John 19:16-30

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Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[0 : 0 0] We're all used to lots of symbols, aren't we? Used to a world where symbols convey so much information without having to use many words. So we see a little red circle with a line through the middle and we know it's the tube. We see a little silhouette of a piece of fruit with a bite taken out and we know, huh, that's apple. That's expensive products made by some poor person in the Far East for a big company in America. And we perhaps never think to question why is there a round circle with a line through it for the tube? Why is there an apple with a bite taken out of it for the apple computer company? There's a chance that we don't think about it. In the same way we're all used to seeing people wearing crosses around necklaces in earrings. And we know it's a symbol of Christianity but maybe we don't think quite why. Where does it come from? Why is that the symbol? And maybe we don't even think how bizarre it is to have a cross as a symbol. The very early Christians hiding in the catacombs of Rome, fearful of persecution and arrest by authorities. He's a different symbol. He's the symbol of a fish. Now it wasn't primarily because Jesus hung around with fishermen, although he did. It's actually because of an acronym. In Greek, the words for Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour. In Greek, the initial letters spell Ichthus, which is the Greek word for a fish. So the fish was like a secret code they could use for each other. And perhaps a little bizarrely, we still see it on bumper stickers of cars today.

But that's where it comes from if you ever wanted to know. So why did the fish get replaced by a cross? After all, if we saw people going around with models of electric chairs on their necklaces or a hangman's guillotine, we'd think it was weird, wouldn't we? And yet the cross, far more than a guillotine or a hangman's noose, was a terrible, terrible means of execution.

The Roman philosopher and politician, Cicero, wrote a little bit before Jesus was born, said this, the very word cross should be far removed, not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. So how did this disgraceful instrument of execution come to be the symbol of the Christian faith? Well, as we look at it, we get to the heart of the matter. We see why it's a symbol of the Christian faith, because it epitomises the message at the heart of Christianity. So that's why I thought it would be good to look today at this little account, this eyewitness account of Jesus' death on the cross. Written by John the disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved, the disciple who gets to care for Jesus' mother in this excerpt we read here.

And I want us to ask three questions as we read through this story. We're actually going to ask them twice. The three questions are this, why is this happening? Who is in control? And so what? So what difference does it make? And I want us to look at those twice. First time through, we'll look at it very superficially, as bystanders in the crowd, just seeing what's happening. But then we're going to go back again and look at them more deeply, with the clues that John, who writes this, is giving us, to help us see underneath the surface what is going on.

[3 : 2 2] So first of all, why is this happening? Well, we pick up the story in verse 16, and we read that Pilate delivered Jesus over to them to be crucified. So why is Jesus being crucified? Well, if you've read the story this far, you'd know why it is not happening. It's not happening because Jesus is guilty of some crime. He's already had two trials, one a mock trial in front of the religious leaders.

But even in that, it's just across the column there, in verse 23 of chapter 18, Jesus says, If what I said is wrong, bear witness about what is wrong. But if what I said is right, why do you strike me? No witnesses can be brought to say what Jesus had said or done was wrong. He was innocent. And then three times after his trial with the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, Pilate announces, I find no guilt in him. You can see that at the end of chapter 18, verse 38. You see at the start of chapter 19, verse 4, and again in verse 6, the chief priests cry, crucify him, crucify him. Pilate said to them, take him yourselves and crucify him. I find no guilt in him. So Jesus is not being killed because he's guilty of anything. On the surface, Jesus is being killed because of political conspiracies.

You need to know a little bit of the historical background of the day. The Roman Empire had taken over and occupied Judea. But they'd done a bit of a deal with the Jewish religious authorities. So the religious authorities still had some power, some influence. They could still run their religion out of the temple in Jerusalem. But it was always on a bit of a fine knife edge.

[5 : 04] They had to behave themselves. And so a few chapters earlier, the leader, Caiaphas the high priest, had said of the trouble Jesus was causing by attracting crowds, if we let Jesus go on like this, this is chapter 11, verse 48, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and take away both our place, that is the temple, and our nation. If Jesus gets any more popular, we will lose our power.

The Romans will take it from us. And so they want to get rid of Jesus. That's their political conspiracy. At the same time, Pilate, the Roman governor, had a really tricky job. Judea was well known as a place where there had been lots of rebellions and uprisings in the centuries before. It was always a pretty tense place. And so he had to try and keep control. If not, he would lose his job. And that is why the Jewish leaders back him into a corner with their political manoeuvres.

If you notice, if you look up just above the section we read, they say to Pilate, look, this is why Jesus is claiming to be a king. So at the top of the column there, in verse 12, everybody makes himself a king opposes Caesar.

So Pilate, if you're not getting rid of this king, then you're no friend of Caesar. You will lose your job. And so Pilate, although he wanted to let Jesus go, because of his own self-interest, wanting to hold on to his job, because of the political manoeuvrings of the Jewish authorities, says, OK, crucify him. You take him, you do it.

[6 : 41] And you see those political games continue. Did you notice that sign that Pilate wrote to go above the cross? The sign with a charge on it? It's there in verse 19.

Pilate wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. What's he doing? He's basically thumbing his nose at the Jewish authorities. He's saying, you want a king? Well, this is your king. Humiliated, dying on a cross. He's a loser like you are. It's Pilate playing political games again. And the Jewish leaders get upset and say, no, change the sign. Pilate just says, no.

What I've written, I have written. Pilate may have lost the battle, but he's making sure they know he is really in control. So why is Jesus dying?

Well, on the face of it, because of a political conspiracy, because of human pride in politics. That then leads us to the second question, doesn't it? Who is in control here? Well, it's not Pilate, is it?

[7 : 40] He had to give up his control. His writing that inscription, the king of the Jews, was his last little gambit to try and show he had some power. In some sense, it looks like the religious leaders are in control, but even they aren't so much in control, because they can't get that charge changed to something they'd be happy with.

Who else is there? Could the soldiers be in control? Well, in a sense, yes. What have they done? They've nailed Jesus to a cross, they've hoisted it up and shoved it in the ground, so it's standing up.

And now they're just getting on with their day, gambling over his clothes. It sort of looks like they're in control, and there's Jesus sitting there, hanging there above them, looking down as his clothes are gambled for.

Powerless to do anything, it seems. So maybe the soldiers are in control. So thirdly, what difference does this make? Why does this matter? Is all that's happening here, another innocent man, unjustly dying, at the hands of a tyrannical regime, and at the hands of religious despots?

We see that kind of thing on television every night, don't we? So one of my neighbours said to me recently, what's so special about this case? Isn't it just another innocent man in a world of suffering?

[9 : 02] Well, let's go back and look at those questions again. But this time looking at them, aware of all the information that John, who's writing this, is putting before us, so we can try to understand the true answers to these questions.

So first of all, why is this happening? We look at verse 24 for a moment. We get a clue to why it's happening here. So they, that's the soldiers, said to one another, let us not tear it, this seamless garment, but cast lots for it, to see whose it shall be.

This was to fulfil what the scripture says. They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. So the soldiers did these things.

These Roman soldiers had no idea of this prophecy. These were words written a thousand years earlier, describing, in Psalm 22, describing an innocent man suffering, forsaken by God, oppressed by people around him, yet going on to praise God at the end of the psalm.

The soldiers had no idea they were fulfilling a prophecy by playing dice for Jesus' clothes, and yet here we get a hint of what is going on. A plan is being fulfilled.

[10:15] Promises are being fulfilled. So why is it happening? It's happening to fulfil what God had promised thousands of years earlier.

We see that not only here, but throughout the story of John's Gospel. If you take one of these Gospels at the end, one of these accounts of Jesus' life, read through it. You'll see throughout it you get hints, or even better than hints, clear clues, that Jesus is fulfilling a plan.

So for example, back in chapter 10, he said, I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Or even before that, in John chapter 3 verse 15, he'd given a clue as to how he would die.

He said, when I am lifted up, whoever believes in me would have eternal life. In John chapter 3 verse 16, the very next verse from that, he gives this clear declaration of why he'd come into the world, what plan he was fulfilling.

He says this, For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

[11:26] So why is this happening? Jesus is dying to save a world. It's not power politics. Jesus isn't a victim of someone else's pride and gains.

Jesus is willingly fulfilling the mission the Father gave him. Now why is that? He, the innocent one, the one who had never done anything wrong, is dying to take the punishment for people like me and you who fail to live up to our own standards, let alone God's standards.

Who fail to treat God as ruler in the world he made. Who try to live as if we're independent of God. And why is Jesus doing it? He's doing it to show us two things. First of all, to show us God's great love.

That God is so loving. He does not want people he has made to perish in hell forever. But also, God is so loving.

He cannot just ignore our sin. He cannot just ignore our rebellion. God is loving, so he has to punish the things we've done wrong. If God didn't punish the evil and the injustice and the pain that we cause in this world, then how could we say he's loving?

[12:47] People often ask me, how could a loving God punish sin? Let me ask you a different question. How could a loving God just overlook sin? If he did, he wouldn't be loving, would he?

He'd be indifferent, which is the opposite of loving. See, because God is love, he sends his son into the world so whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

He's so loving, he must judge, he must condemn all that is wrong. He's so loving, he wants to forgive. And so this is where the rescue plan comes in. This is why Jesus is dying, it's to fulfil the rescue plan that was promised in the Old Testament and unfolds in the New.

So that's what is happening. That's why this is happening. Jesus is showing us God's love. Love to rescue us. Love to condemn sin.

So then who's in control? Is it the soldiers? Is it Pilate? Is it the religious authorities? No. Look carefully. John gives us three pieces of evidence to show that it's really Jesus in control.

[13:56] Look down to the end there, bottom of the page, verse 26. Here's Jesus hanging on the cross and when Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, women, behold your son.

Then he said to the disciple, behold your mother. From that hour the disciple took her to his own home. I don't know about you but when I'm in pain I'm really bad at looking out for other people. I get very obsessed with what's causing me discomfort. I get very irritable with everybody else. Maybe that's just me. But what does Jesus do? As he dislocates his shoulders every time he breathes, as he hangs there with nails through his hands and feet, he looks out on and loves his mother and cares for her.

It's a sign that he's really in control. But secondly, look at verse 28. After this, Jesus knowing that all was now finished, said to fulfil the scripture, I thirst.

He's so in control that even at that moment as he reaches the end of his life, he can do one little detail to fulfil another scripture, to fulfil another promise laid out in the Old Testament.

[15:14] Then the greatest piece of evidence, the third piece of evidence is there in verse 30. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, it is finished and bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Notice the words, it is finished. Not I am finished, but it is finished. It's the cry of a student when they get to the end of their final exam or final piece of coursework, it's finished!

It's the cry of a couple who for 25 years would pay off their mortgage and finally it's done. It's finished! We own this place! It's the cry of a prisoner who's finally let out having served his sentence.

It is finished! It's the cry of the relieved marathon runner who after 26.4 miles of agony crosses the line with joy on her face.

It is finished! What is finished? What is finished is the work God the Father had given the Son to do. What is finished is the work of rescuing rebels like me and you.

[16:19] What is finished is fulfilling the promise that I read earlier in chapter 3 verse 16. That God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

That is finished. So that anyone who believes in him will not be judged themselves but will have eternal life instead. So let me ask again what difference does this make?

And we rattle through very briefly five things we cannot say. Five things we cannot say. We cannot say first that God doesn't care about the injustice of the world. He does.

He cares deeply. He came down in the presence of his Son and suffered injustice himself so he could put an end to it all one day. Secondly we cannot say all religions are basically the same.

Every other religion is all about what human beings have to do to impress God or to get forgiven by God to earn life from God. Christianity is completely opposite.

[17:23] It's not about us trying to get up to God it's about God come down to rescue us in the presence of his Son. Thirdly we cannot say my life isn't worth anything no one cares about me my life's a mess.

If you trust in Jesus see how much your life is worth that the eternal Son of God the one through whom everything was made as John said right back at the start of this book took on human flesh lived a human life and died on a cross to rescue you.

You cannot say you are worthless if you put your trust in Jesus and he has paid a supremely valuable price for you. Fourthly you cannot say oh if there is a God I'm sure I'll be alright because I'm a nice person or I've been baptised or I go to church I'm open minded I'm fair we cannot say that.

If you can be accepted and forgiven by God by our own actions if any of us can be accepted because of what we've done then why would it be necessary for Jesus Christ the Son of God to die in our place?

So we cannot say I'll be alright on my own without Jesus we cannot say all religions are the same we cannot say my life is worth nothing we cannot say God doesn't care God doesn't understand and the final thing we cannot say is oh it doesn't really matter we cannot say it doesn't really matter God has gone to these great lengths to open a way for people like me and you to be forgiven that we may not perish we may not spend eternity in hell cut off from God but instead we may have a life that begins now a whole life the life we are meant to have John at the end of the next chapter will write these words these things about Jesus are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name so you cannot say this doesn't matter because it's through Jesus' death that we can have life so that is why the cross is the heart of the matter it's the centre of the Christian message

[19:41] Christianity is not about what we do it's what God has done it's the heart of the matter because in the cross we see the heart of God his hatred of all that is evil all that pollutes all that damages the people he's made and the world he's made but also we see his heart in his great love for lost people and it's the heart of the matter because how we respond to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross will determine not just our life now but all eternity for us so how do you respond to Jesus let me pray let me get a couple of minutes for questions if there are any